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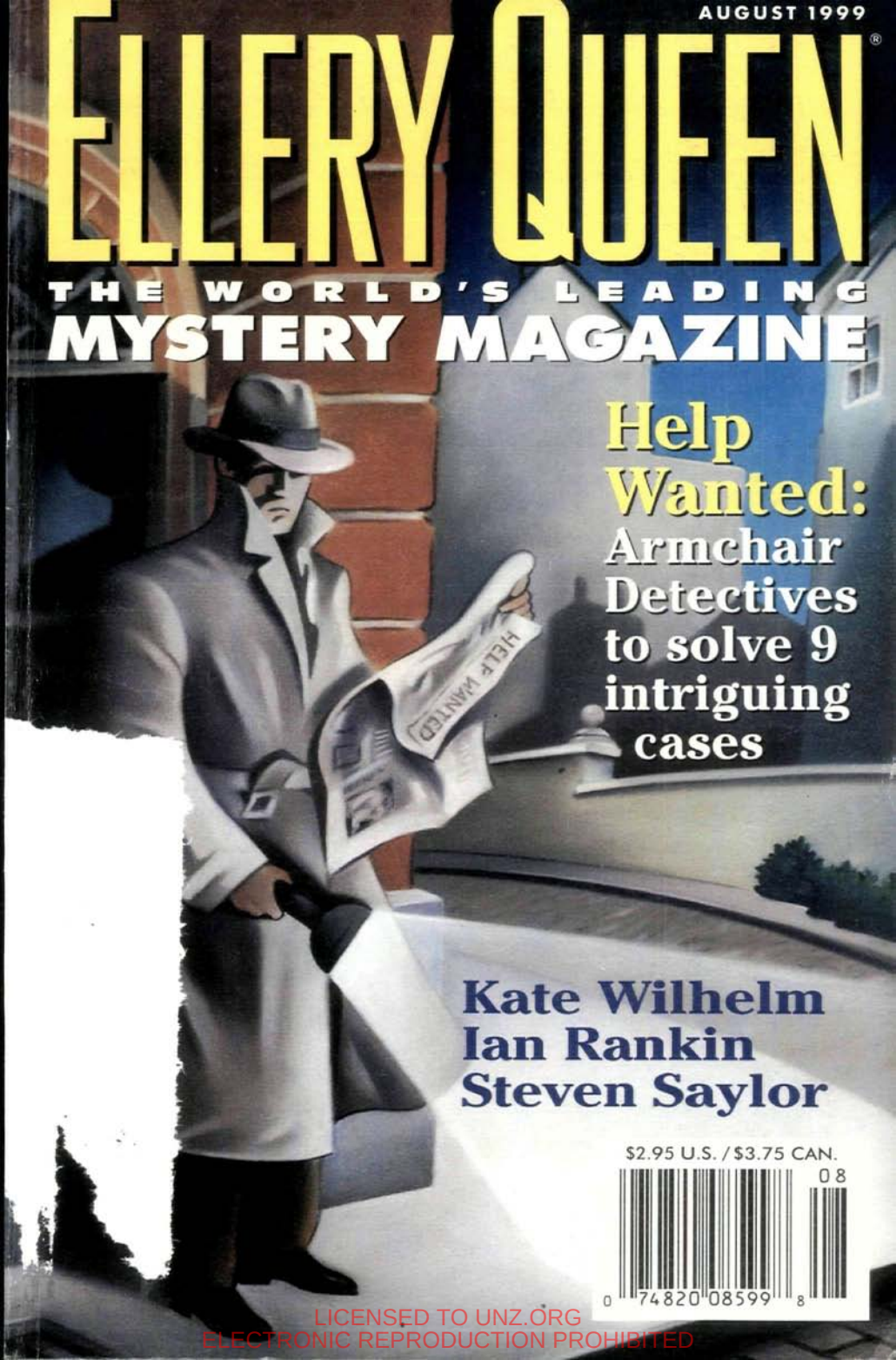

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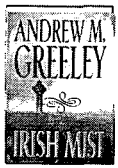

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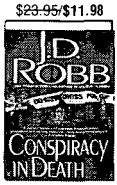

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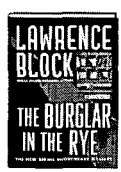

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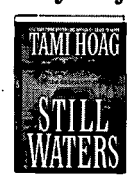

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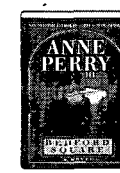

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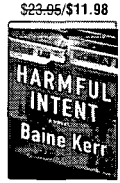

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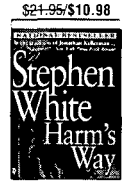

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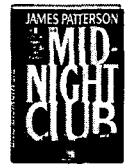

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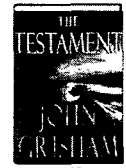

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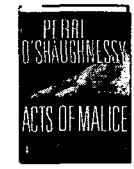

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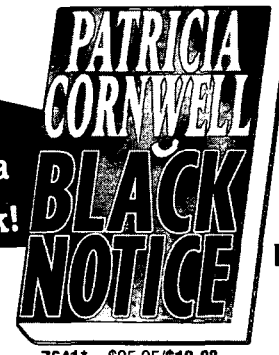

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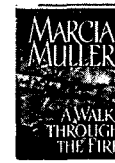

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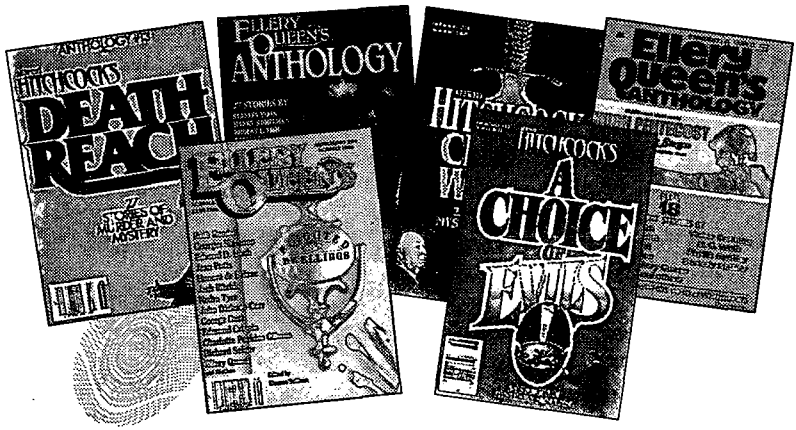

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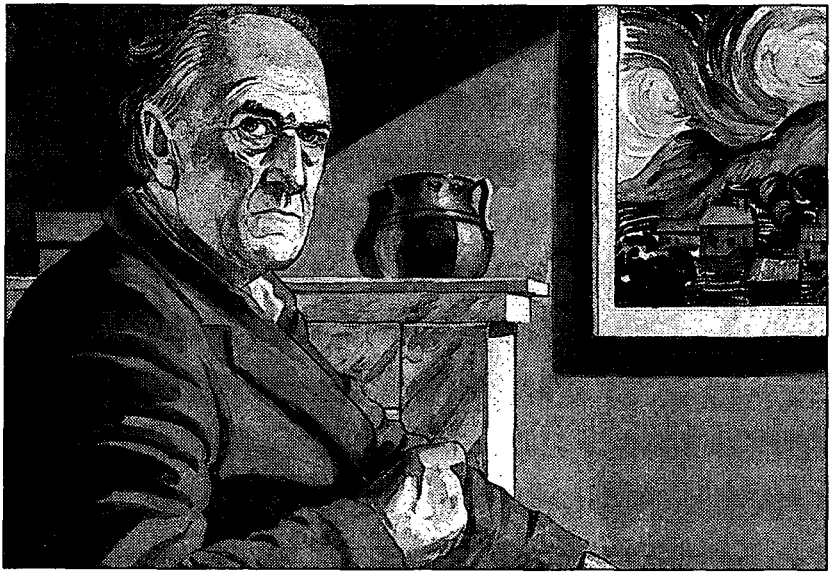

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AN IMPERFECT GIFT

by Kate Wilhelm

1.

When Al Gruber called Charlie Meiklejohn for an appointment, Charlie's first thought was that someone at the Gruberhaus restaurant had sticky fingers; his second thought was that he would turn Al over to a Manhattan investigator and that would be that. He had no intention of making the two-hour-plus drive to the city. He had suggested as much, but Al had insisted that he needed someone he could trust—Charlie. No one else would do. And now he was here, on Charlie's back patio in upper New York state, sipping coffee and pretending to relax in the September sunshine.

There had been a light frost during the past week, and Charlie had started to put away the outdoor furniture, but Constance had said no, not yet. They were due a nice Indian summer; considering what a cold wet year they had endured, that was no more than simple justice. And she had been right, of course. The weather was very fine. Asters were blooming, roses were budding again for a riot of fall blossoms, and the dahlias were showing off in a profu-

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sion of gaudy colors. Very fine, indeed.

But Al Gruber was having trouble coming to the point of the visit. They had discussed his sister Bernice and his brother Daniel; his father, who was in his seventies; the restaurant business, which was quite good. Charlie had known the Grubers all his life, had played with the three kids, and the one who had died of polio. He had eaten more meals than he could count in the Gruber kitchen, and later in the restaurant, which was a family business with an enviable reputation.

"Charlie," Constance had said thoughtfully when he told her that Al was dropping in, "today is your day to cook, remember. Do you want to cook for a chef like Al?" Because the answer was no, he was getting impatient now as Al continued to reminisce about the good old days.

Al Gruber was fifty-two, florid-faced, with a receding hairline. His hair had been quite dark, now it was streaked with white; it was hard to tell if he would go totally white-haired or totally bald first. It appeared to be a dead heat. He was a little overweight, but Charlie couldn't remember a time when he hadn't been a little overweight, and otherwise, he looked good, if troubled.

Finally Al set down his cup and drew in a long breath. "It's funny, Charlie. All the way up here I went over this mess again and again, trying to find the best way to get it all out. Know what I mean? It's complicated."

"Start at the beginning, go to the end, and stop," Charlie murmured.

"That's the only way I can tell you so it makes any sense," Al said. He leaned back in his chair and gazed at the barn at the back of the property. "Just bear with me a little bit. Okay?" He didn't wait for a response.

"You know my father escaped from Nazi Germany back in the thirties when he was just a kid. If you know that much, and about everyone does, you know as much as I've ever known until recently, but these last couple of years, it seems his mind is doing tricks, like he can't remember last week, or even yesterday sometimes, but his early years in Germany are clear as spring water."

Hailed by the *San Francisco Chronicle* as "One of the masters of psychological fiction in America," Kate Wilhelm returns to *EQMM* with a case for Charlie and Constance Meiklejohn. The extraordinary inventiveness of P.I. Charlie and psychologist Constance has become a trademark of the series. Look for an omnibus of novels featuring the pair: *The Casebook for Constance and Charlie*. (St. Martin's/12/99)

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He took a sip of coffee, then continued. "Father, his little sister Hulga, and my grandparents, Kurt and Anya Gruber, lived in Hanover. Kurt and Anya were part of a group that smuggled people out of Germany in those years; Anya had relatives in Holland, and they were a link to the outside world. From Hanover, over the countryside, across the Wester Ems, and into Holland, that was one of the routes they used. Grandfather's sister had emigrated to America years before and she had begged him to get out, to bring his family to the States, but it was a hard call. He and Grandmother had friends, the restaurant, relatives. . . . It was a hard decision, one he put off too long. He would instruct others on what to pack, how to pack stuff, important papers in waterproof pouches taped to their legs, and to wear loose, dark pants. For the women to sew the family jewels, if they had any, into petticoats and wear them, and dark clothes on top. Convert everything they could to gold or silver. Like that. But more important, he had access to food and could provide a little cheese, sausage, things he could scrounge from the restaurant."

His voice was almost without inflection as he told the story; his gaze remained on the barn.

Kurt and Anya had younger friends, the Waldmans. Marlene Waldman worked in the restaurant and Kelmut had worked there in the summers when he wasn't in school. He became an assistant economics professor, penniless, of course; they had two children, younger than the Gruber children, and Kelmut was terrified that he would be conscripted. He decided to flee with his family, and Kurt and Anya knew it was time for them to escape if they were ever going to. The underground resistance was being infiltrated with traitors; travel permits were hard to get; gasoline and food rationing made travel a nightmare. And everyone knew a broader war was coming. They made their preparations. Kurt began to stash food under Kelmut's house, a few miles out in the country. Anya sewed the family jewelry into the petticoats; Kurt melted down the family silverware and cast small ingots that could be sewn into hidden pockets in his coat; they had a target date, the first week of August, a time when the restaurant closed for holiday and their absence would not arouse suspicion.

But late one night in June the phone rang, and when Kurt answered, the caller said, "I'm sorry. It's a wrong number." Now Al paused and lifted his coffee cup. It was empty and Constance refilled it. Neither she nor Charlie had stirred as Al told his story. She felt immobilized, transfixed, seeing in her mind the frightened family, feeling their dread.

"All right," Al said. "So they had been betrayed; that was the signal to run immediately, to grab whatever they could and run. Grandfather taped the papers to his own leg; Grandmother put on

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her petticoat with the jewels. Then Grandfather taped a picture to my father's leg. A strange thing to take with them, but it had been in the family for a long time, a painting of the first Gruberhaus." He looked at Constance and shrugged slightly. "Four generations of Grubers, all in the restaurant business, including us now. Anyway, they beat it in their car. They were fairly prosperous, but even so, they had enough gas to drive just a few miles before they had to abandon the car and continue on foot. They were heading for Kelmut Waldman's house, their supply of food, and to warn Kelmut that they had to go now, not in August. But when they got within sight of the tiny farmhouse, it was in flames, and they were afraid the Waldmans had already been arrested. Grandmother cried because they had not brought any food with them, and now they couldn't go near their supplies.

"They walked across the country, and when they could find crops growing, they stole food. It was raining, they were wet, cold, starving, traveling at night, hiding by day, and toward the end, Grandmother collapsed. Grandfather and my father, who was fourteen, carried her after that."

Al stopped speaking, and no one else broke the silence until he started again. "They made it to the rendezvous point, and to their relief the Waldmans were already there, and they had food. Another couple had made it; two others had not shown up and never did. No one could cross the border on foot; it was too dangerous, too heavily patrolled. What they did was hide in a sand and mud cave until the tidal bore on the Wester Ems coincided with the dark of the moon, and then a boat would arrive from the Holland side. Such brave Dutch men, they knew about tidal bores, about inlets and rivers. When the surge flowed back to the sea, they rode the outgoing tide back to the Dutch side. No oars, just a rudder; they didn't dare risk the sound of oars slapping the water. They trusted the tide to carry them."

His voice thickened and he cleared his throat, drank coffee, then went on. "They waited for the tide; the boat came and they got in, but their betrayal had been complete. Suddenly, as they crouched in the bottom of the boat, under canvas, there were searchlights, machine guns . . . screams. The boat began to swing around, uncontrolled, and it started to sink."

He paused once more, and then finished this part swiftly. "I brought a tape we recorded of my father's account. For now let me say only that he managed to drag himself ashore on the Holland side. And there he passed out, and was found the next day by the Dutch; he was naked, a deep gash in his head, delirious. But he was saved, and for years he believed he was the only survivor. He was cared for by his relatives in Goningen, and six months later he joined his aunt in New York."

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The sun had dipped behind the barn and shadows were lengthening, darkening. One by one the three cats had appeared, languorous from sunbathing, eyeing the table greedily.

"Let's go inside," Constance said. "I think a drink's in order, a little cheese or something." No one objected.

In the house, as if on automatic pilot, Al Gruber sat at the dinette table, more at home in the kitchen than he would be in the living room, Charlie suspected.

Then, as Constance rustled up some snack food, and Charlie got out an assortment of bottles, Al said, "I don't want to take much more of your time. I'll try to wrap this up. Just bourbon, water on the side, Charlie."

Charlie fixed the drinks and took them to the table.

Al resumed his story as soon as they were all seated. "When my father's aunt died she left him a little money, not much, but some. She had made him go to school, but all he could think of was starting a new Gruberhaus. Six tables in those days. He worked hard and every spare dime went into the business. You know, Charlie. You saw how it was when we were kids. We all worked. But things were okay. Then, back in nineteen seventy-two, he saw an article in the newspaper: Henrik Wall's death was reported; his survivors, a son Eric, a daughter Greta, some grandchildren. Father was overjoyed; they were his old friends, the Waldmans. His father had been Erik's godfather; Kelmut and Marlene had worked in their restaurant, and they and little Gerde had survived, after all. We tried to reason with him, different names, people of wealth, position, not his old friends, but he knew what he knew. Erik, he said, looked exactly like his father. You know how he is, Charlie. Gets an idea in his head, bingo, no room for alterations. He knew. So, he said, they changed their names; many refugees did, with cause in most cases. Nothing would do but for him to write a letter to his old childhood friend Erik Waldman, who was now called Eric Wall."

Al sighed deeply and shook his head. "In time, a long time, he got a stiff little note back, thanking him for his condolences and saying that he was mistaken in their identity. So sorry. Period." He drank his bourbon down straight, followed it with a sip of water.

Charlie and Constance exchanged looks; hers meant, What is it all leading up to? His meant, I can't tell him to close the curtain and leave now. Neither said a word aloud.

Al glanced at his watch, confirmed the time with the wall clock, and said briskly, "All right. Now, skip forward. What do they say, fast forward? That's it. Fast forward to last spring. Bernice and our father—he lives with her and her family—were watching a television show about mansions, palaces, castles, that sort of

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thing, in America. Suddenly Father jumped up yelling, 'That's it! There's the country inn!' Bernice was scared. Father is seventy-six and, as I said, his mind plays tricks with his memory. She was afraid he was having a stroke or something. He was crying and yelling that it was the country inn, this magnificent estate on the Hudson was a country inn. To calm him down she promised to order the video and let him watch it again. Meanwhile, he began rummaging through boxes, through trunks, and one day he found what he had been looking for. An old faded photograph, a daguerreotype that his aunt had left him, a picture of his grandfather and grandmother and a bunch of others in front of a small thatched-roof building. A country inn. The first Gruberhaus in the village of Hanover. Not much of the building is shown; it was a picture of the people, but you can see part of the inn."

Charlie did not sigh; he knew he didn't sigh, but Al gave him an apologetic smile and opened both hands palm up. "I'm sorry, but this is part of it. The video arrived and we all watched it, fast forwarding past the Hearst castle, past the DuPont and Rockefeller estates, past Monticello, until Father said, stop, watch. And we did. We were looking at the interior of an estate perched over the Hudson River. The show was mostly about the architecture, the gardens and statuary, with a woman leading the camera here and there. She goes into this room and the camera takes a look all around, but she's walking straight across toward a fireplace. There's a lot of art on the wall, not in focus or anything. She begins to turn around to point to something, the camera zooms in on her, and Father yelled again, 'Stop the film!' Then we inched back and forth until he said to stop again, and there on the wall was a painting that looked very much like his old photograph of the first Gruberhaus."

This time Charlie did speak. But gently. "Al, there must be hundreds, thousands of paintings and photographs of old thatched-roof buildings, and to my eye they *all* look very much alike. What's the point?"

"That's the problem, Charlie. Now we grow near the purpose of this *professional* call. We want you to go to that house on the Hudson River and get a very good, very sharp picture of that painting."

Charlie nearly choked on bourbon he had just started to swallow.

"Because, if it's the same, it belongs to my father. That's the painting that his father taped to his leg for their flight from Germany. It now hangs in the home of Erik Waldman, who calls himself Eric Wall."

Al held up his hand in a commanding way. "Let me tell you one more family story. The first Gruberhaus was opened by my great

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grandfather, Hermann Gruber, in eighteen sixty, or thereabouts. Years later, twenty years or more, a group of travelers arrived, intending to stay only for a night, but one of them arrived feverish and ill. He remained for many days and Hermann and his wife cared for him. When he became stronger, he painted a picture of their inn and called it 'A Country Inn.' Hermann was very pleased and wanted no other payment for the interval the guest had lingered in the inn, and that was just as well since the traveler had very little money. Then he happened to see the painter start to paint over the picture, and he grabbed his arm and pulled him away, demanding to know what he was doing, why. There was by then a white swatch on the lower right corner. The painter explained that he had ruined the picture, that he had intended a perfect gift and instead it was imperfect, not fit to give to his benefactors. Hermann stood between him and the painting and demanded that he leave it alone, just sign it, and he and his wife would forever treasure it. The painter refused to sign it, but finally he wrote on the back of the canvas instead. What he wrote was, 'You comforted me in my distress, you fed me when I hungered, you restored me, and, in return, to my shame, I present you with an imperfect gift.'"

Al shrugged. "Flowery, maybe, but it was heartfelt. Then he left and never came that way again. My father grew up studying that painting that hung in his family's living room. He knew the story, how treasured it was, almost like a holy icon. And he carried it, a link to his own past, from Hanover to his encounter with the Wester Ems. It is his."

They had done all the proper things, Al said then. A professional photographer had isolated and enhanced the picture, enlarged it, but what he had not been able to do was see through the head of the woman who had conducted the tour of the mansion. And her head obscured the lower right-hand corner of the painting. They needed a photograph of the entire thing, and then they could decide what steps to take to recover it.

"Erik denied my father once, in nineteen seventy-two, and there's no reason to believe that he would change his mind and admit to the past. If we enquire, he could easily substitute something for that picture, something similar, and say get lost. And once my father is gone, there won't be anyone to make the claim, to give the true history of the painting."

Charlie was watching condensation run crazily down the side of his glass. He traced one of the tracks with his fingertip, and, watching it, he asked softly, "What's the punch line, Al? Not just a painting, is it?"

"No," Al said, just as softly. "The artist refused to sign the paint-

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ing, but he signed his sentimental inscription on the back of it. He wrote: 'To my friend, Herr Gruber, Vincent van Gogh.'"

2.

That night they studied the two pictures under a strong light in the dining room. Using tracing paper, Constance had outlined the Gruber clan who had posed for the daguerreotype, all caught in stony expressions, poses held so long they had started to look pained, or even like painted dolls designed to frighten small children. Al had pointed to various family members, naming them when he could, but he didn't know them all. His father had been a child, as wooden as any of the adults, his eyes bulging somewhat, as if he had been biting his cheek to keep from moving, keep from smiling. With the tracing for a guide, she had cut out an opaque silhouette and carefully taped it in place to screen out the people, to let her and Charlie concentrate on the building better. She had done the same thing to the photograph made from the video of the painting in the Wall mansion. The woman in that picture was in profile, her arm raised, pointing to ornate marble molding, on her way to a mammoth fireplace of green marble streaked with gold. The painting was partly obscured by her face.

Part of a timbered building was in the family portrait, heavy black timbers from the look of them, and part of a thatched roof, flowers, the edge of a shuttered window, little more than that.

"Flowers look the same," Charlie murmured.

"Hollyhocks, sunflowers. He was mad about sunflowers in his later years."

"Everything's so brown, no golden flowers, red roses, just shades of brown."

"The window looks the same, and the thatch."

"They all looked like that." He stood up and rubbed his back. "Could be, I guess."

"Or not," she said.

Charlie had asked Al a lot of questions, and then had said soberly, "You know as well as I do that something like this could drag out through the courts for decades. Proving provenance is caviar and champagne for attorneys."

"That's why we came to you, Charlie, to see that it doesn't drag out forever. Our father couldn't bear it. When he began to recover from his ordeal, he had nightmares; then he started a new life in America and gradually the nightmares went away. Ever since he saw that picture on television, he's had the nightmares again. He's in a hurricane, something like that, with the wind driving rain in his face so hard he's blinded, and choking. And he can hear Hulga, his little sister, crying out for Mama, for Papa, then for him, for Franz. But he can't get to her. The wind, water, something keeps pushing him back, and she cries out for him to help.

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Then he wakes up in a cold sweat. He's an old man, he can't stand much of that."

As he prepared to leave then, he said, "Don't commit yourself now. Think about it, how to resolve it. You have the video, the pictures, a tape of my father's voice telling his own story; whatever help we can provide, we will. Think about it, Charlie. Give me a call."

Now, leaving the pictures side by side on the table, they went to the living room, Charlie to his Morris chair, where their orange cat Candy claimed his lap, and Constance to the wing chair. She watched Brutus terrorize Ashcan into retreating when he tried to take her lap; Brutus claimed it, and Ashcan decided he needed a bath and proceeded to clean himself. "Wimp," she said under her breath.

"We need to hire a cat lap, or else get rid of one of them," Charlie said.

She nodded. "We could hire a helicopter, land on the lawn, say we just dropped by for a visit."

Charlie didn't even blink at the change of subject. "I was thinking along the lines of skydiving in."

"Or take a canoe out on the Hudson, scale the cliff to the property, and enter."

"Apply for jobs, butler and maid, maybe."

"We have to remember tranquilizer darts for the dogs."

"What dogs?"

"Big ones, trace their ancestry all the way back to the original Hound of the Baskervilles." Charlie grinned.

Neither of them suggested that they listen to Franz Gruber's tape-recorded voice recounting his ordeal. Not that night. What they needed was a good look at the original painting, and a sharp, complete photograph of it, front and back, she thought glumly, and without arousing anyone's suspicion that that was what they were after. The two pictures on the dining room table were tantalizingly alike, but that wasn't good enough. What was in the lower right-hand corner of the original; what, if anything, was written on the back?

When Al spoke about his father's nightmares, she had seen Charlie's eyes become almost lusterless for a moment, and she had felt a jolt. He had been a fireman, she had been working toward her doctorate in psychology when they were newlyweds; he had moved up to arson investigations, and she had earned her degree and started teaching and doing clinical research at Columbia. Later, his nightmares had started. He was always in a long hallway with a fire roaring at his back, racing toward him. Every door he passed had a red-hot knob, and he kept trying to go forward, get away, escape. At the moment he realized a blank wall

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faced him and the inferno was at his heels he woke up in a sweat that drenched him, his pajamas, the bedding. His body was trying to put out the fire.

"You can't live with nightmares like that," she had lectured him, straight out of the textbooks. His was a classical nightmare, she had said; he had to change whatever in his life was bringing it on. Eventually he had moved from arson to the police department, where they had put him in Homicide. Al Gruber, without any study of psychology at all, knew exactly the same thing: Whatever was bringing on his father's nightmares had to change to free him.

She had no doubt that Charlie would do whatever he could. As a private investigator now, with both of them retired more or less, pensioned, with a few investments that had been wise, a daughter who was self-sufficient through grants and scholarships and who seemed inclined to continue to gather degrees for the rest of her life, Charlie worked only when he wanted to. No trailing of wayward husbands or wives; no looking into pilfering at the office; no tracking down runaway kids. . . . Many of the jobs he did, jobs they did together, had been quite lucrative, she had to admit, but he no longer did anything for just the money. First he had to be interested. And he would not be able to turn down his old childhood friend.

"First thing we have to do," she said, stroking Brutus absently, "is find out what we can about the Wall family."

Charlie nodded.

On Thursday, three days after Al's visit, when Constance arrived home from the community center where she conducted an aikido class four days a week, Charlie was at the telephone in his downstairs office. She waved, and continued through the house.

Later, hoping she had done something about lunch, he found her in the kitchen sorting tomatoes that looked green as hell to him. She had a large basket of them, as if she had picked every damn one bigger than a marble.

He watched silently as she inspected a fruit and either put it to one side on the counter, or tossed it into a plastic pail. It was a bright sunny day again, just as she had predicted, and he was mystified.

"Why?" he asked finally.

"It's time," she said.

He knew the routine: Any blemish at all would consign the tomato to the pail and then to the compost; she would wrap the good ones individually in newspaper and gently pack them all into shallow boxes, and later that fall when others were paying a buck ninety-nine a pop, she would bring forth one perfectly ripe tomato after another. But why now? If he asked again, he suspected her

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answer would be even more irritating. Because. He went to the refrigerator and started to rummage for the makings of a sandwich.

"Another wash?" she asked, turning a tomato around and around appraisingly.

He grunted. He made them both sandwiches; she abandoned her task, washed her hands, and they ate. "I called Phil; I want to know who's in charge of security at the Wall place. He argued." That really meant very little; Phil Stern, their old friend in the insurance racket, head of a consortium of insurance companies, always argued first. "He'll call back. I have to call Al, and I don't have a damn thing to tell him."

He doubted that there was anything left on the public record that they had not uncovered, and that simply wasn't good enough. They had spent hours on their two computers, using every search engine available; they had read newspaper archives and reference books, magazine articles, financial profiles. . . . And what they had found out was that Henrik Wall had fled Rotterdam with his wife and children during the bombing that had reduced that city to rubble. The rest of his family had been wiped out; the family jewelry business destroyed, all records turned to ashes. Henrik, the youngest of the Wall offspring, had not been a diamond merchant, had gone into economics instead, but he had salvaged what he could of the business stock, had carried out of Holland as much as he and his family could manage. From Rotterdam he had escaped to Switzerland, and on to America, where he had quickly established himself as a knowledgeable financier and economist who was fluent in six languages, a great admirer of Roosevelt, and an avid supporter of the war effort. He had done well during the war years, and better in the years that followed.

Charlie suspected that the FBI had a file on him as thick as a telephone book, but publicly there was not a word to be found that diminished his patriotism, his honesty, his integrity in business dealings, or his propensity for making money. And his son Eric was a chip off the old block.

The problem was that the Wall story was as credible as the Gruber story.

The mansion on the Hudson had been built by another quick-money man who had made a killing on the stock market in the twenties, and then was killed by the collapse of the same market. The mansion had gone on the block for taxes; no takers. It had remained an empty mausoleum until Wall had bought it in the fifties, for approximately one tenth of its assessed value at that time. It was worth millions now.

Concerning his wife, whose name was given as Marta Wall, not a word had been printed until her death was reported in 1966,

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"following a long illness." The only mention they had found of the daughter, Greta, was that she had survived her mother's death, and in 1972 the death of her father. Period. Finis.

The four grandchildren who had been mentioned in the article about Henrik Wall's death were all Eric's children. By now, more than twenty years later, Eric probably had grandchildren. There was no mention of Greta's ever having been married.

Charlie sat brooding over a cup of coffee, and Constance returned to her green tomatoes. He liked watching the little play of muscles in her arms as she moved; she had good muscles, better than his, he sometimes thought. But the way she worked out, she should have good muscles. And, of course, he followed the thought, their builds were so different; he was stocky and she was long and fluid. And golden, he thought then.

She glanced up at him, smiled, and he realized he had been smiling.

"You have to finish them all now?" he asked.

"You just want to put off that phone call."

"Wrong. That's not what I want."

She laid down the tomato she was holding and washed her hands again.

Later, propped up on his elbow, watching her get dressed, he said, "I think I'll call Al tomorrow or maybe on Saturday. Let's take a little ride first, take a few pictures of the picturesque villages along the Hudson. Talk to a few people about this and that."

When Phil Stern called back that evening, he said snappishly, "Pal. That's P dot A dot L dot." Charlie groaned. P.A.L. Security was very good. Like the security around Fort Knox.

He was not at all surprised the next morning to see that there had been another frost overnight, harder than the last one, but still not a deep freeze. It would have gotten the tomatoes, Constance murmured at the breakfast table. Of course, he had thought.

He drove the first leg of the trip, to the village of Longview, and they got out to talk to various people about this and that. At a counter in a gift shop they talked to a woman with pink hair who said she was the chamber of commerce. "You're a little too early for the fall foliage," she said pleasantly. "But you're lucky, too, because then you can't even find a table in a restaurant, and forget motels unless you have reservations a couple of weeks in advance."

"What we're really interested in," Charlie said, "is that castle we saw on television. You know, last spring sometime? I said, as soon as we get the tomatoes in, let's take a run down and have a look at it. To think it's so close and we never even knew about it."

The chamber of commerce shook her pink head. "I'm afraid you

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won't get a look at it now, either. I don't know a soul who has had a look at it, except on television."

"They don't let the public in? You know, tours, something like that?" Charlie asked plaintively.

"Never. We were all surprised when they let those television people in. And you can't even see it from the road. We have the video, if you're interested in that. And I have a map with other historic buildings. . . . "

In a diner a teenaged boy looked at Charlie in disbelief when he said he'd bet the kids in the area had found a way to sneak in.

"You kidding? Man, they got sec*ur*ity. Be worth your leg to try to get inside that place."

An old man weeding a planter with yellow marigolds and red petunias said, "They used to drive through now and then, years ago, you know, but since the new highway was put in, they don't even do that." He went back to his weeding. Frost hadn't hit here yet. At home the petunias had become black overnight.

A clerk in a sports shop told them that the Walls never used local people for anything. They hired their servants out of a New York City agency, and *they* were snooty and didn't talk.

Their waitress in a cafe said, "There used to be a real cute guy come in now and then, a chauffeur or something, he said he was. He'd chat a little, flirt a little. You know? But he'd clam up if you mentioned the folks at the big house. He didn't stay long," she said regretfully.

They were running out of places where they could wander in, browse, ask a few questions, buy a trinket or a cup of coffee. "Library?" Charlie said dourly on the sidewalk, surveying the small town that had been prettified for the tourists with planters of blooming flowers, striped awnings, new paint. Everyone said they should come back when the trees turned; it got real pretty then. And it would, he knew; the maples would turn the ambient light pink, and cars would be bumper-to-bumper on the streets.

"You do the library; I'll take the bookstore," Constance said, as dejected as he was.

The bookstore was tiny and cluttered, with more used books than new ones. Two young women were chatting near a section of mysteries, and an ancient woman was in a rocking chair working a word-find puzzle.

"Help you?" she asked, keeping her pencil on the puzzle. Her pale face was like a maze of crisscrossing lines.

"Just browsing," Constance said, going to the section of local books and gardening books mixed together.

"Help yourself," the old woman said. Her lips moved as she searched for a word.

The two young women moved to the farthest corner of the store

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and continued to talk, their voices lower now. Constance glanced at them, and abruptly they walked past her, out to the sidewalk, where they stood talking.

"Oh, dear," Constance said. "Did I run them off?"

"They weren't going to buy anything," the woman said; she sniffed. "Never do. You looking for anything in particular?"

"Well, I saw that television show, the one that had the Wall mansion, and I thought there might be a book about it, the history of the building, the gardens. It was so beautiful."

"Used to have two books about it," the woman said. "After that show they both got bought."

"Maybe a dealer could find one of them for me."

"Doubt it. Self-published books like that, they don't get circulated all that much. The library has one you could look at. Shows pictures, great big cobwebs everywhere, boarded-up windows. But you can still see how pretty it must have been before Fielding died. Before the Walls came in."

"Oh, that must have been back in the thirties or forties. Even that would be a find."

"It was a long time ago. I had that book forty years, two copies. Gone now. Probably won't ever be another one. The folks up there like their privacy."

"Oh? Do you know them, the Walls?"

"Of course not! They don't mingle. There used to be a teacher, a speech therapist, something like that, who'd chat. Talked about books mostly. She loved to read and I did too. Still do, but my eyes get tired."

"Speech therapist? At the Walls' place. Whatever for?"

"For the girl. She couldn't talk, you know, not after what she went through, the bombing and all. For years she couldn't talk, and then, when she got her speech back, they had a therapist stay up at the house with her. Had to teach her the way you would teach a baby, and her a grown woman. She used to buy a book for her now and then, children's books."

"You had books in Dutch?"

"No, no. English. She spoke English just like you and me. But she stuttered. A bad stutter. I guess that's what they were trying to cure her of. Don't think it worked, though. You have to get them when they're younger. She was too old by then to correct her problem. Poor thing."

They were still chatting when a young woman ran into the bookstore and knelt at the old woman's rocking chair. "You were dead right, Grandma. Twin boys. March twentieth. How did you know?"

Constance slipped out of the bookstore and saw Charlie in the

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passenger seat of their Volvo across the street, apparently studying a road map. She slid in behind the wheel.

"Jackpot?" he asked, folding the map.

"Something. I don't know what it is yet. Home?"

"Scenic route," he said, and directed her to the county road that ran past the Wall estate.

But there was nothing to see, they had to admit minutes later, when on Charlie's side sparse woods gave way to a stretch of mown grass, ten feet wide, backed up by a high chain-link fence. The grass continued on the other side of the fence for about six to eight feet, and the woods started again.

"That's it," Charlie said with resignation. "First fence wired; it's posted, High Voltage warnings. And then, inside the next border, an invisible fence."

"Invisible fence," she repeated.

"Right. Infrared sensors, a signal that sets off an alarm inside the house, the sheriff's office, who knows where else, and also gives a dog a pretty good jolt if it crosses it. Keeps your pooch in your yard. I bet those dogs are trained to charge through at a signal that the first fence has been breached."

"You see dogs?"

"Nope, and you won't, unless you cut through the outer perimeter. P.A.L.'s specialty, electric fences, trained dogs, radio signals. Expensive to install, then practically maintenance-free and cheap to run. . . . "

The high fence followed a narrow driveway that curved behind trees within twenty feet of the road; it reappeared on the other side of the drive. They followed it for another half mile to a T-intersection and Charlie said they might as well take the turn, hit the highway, and head for home.

A few minutes later, on the highway, heading north, Constance recounted what the old woman in the bookstore had told her.

"You scored more than I did. All I got was a floor plan and stuff about the original mansion. Lots of cobwebs. It's renovated, updated, modern plumbing and air conditioning installed, new wiring. God knows how accurate any of it is." They both became silent.

She was trying to remember an article, a monograph, something she had read years earlier, eons earlier, studies of children who had suffered trauma during the blitz of London in World War II. Eudora . . . Dorothea . . .

"Honey, pull over," Charlie said quietly. His hand squeezed her thigh.

"What? What's wrong?"

"Just pull off the road."

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She slowed, turned on the signal, and pulled over to the shoulder. "What happened?"

"Nothing. Not yet. You were doing about ninety. Let's change places."

"Dorothea Hardesty-Wyndham," she said.

"Right. Out with you. I'll drive." He drove the rest of the way home, and he did not ask her a question, or interrupt in any way whatever was happening in her brain any more than she would have interrupted him when an idea was shaping itself, taking form, finding substance.

That night Charlie got out steaks from the freezer, and made baked potatoes and a salad, in no mood to do more than the basics. Constance had gone straight up to her office, without a word, not even a hint of where her mind was wandering, what paths she was following, what goal she had glimpsed. Four hours later she still had not surfaced.

Then, after eating with an absent-minded oblivion for his efforts, she said, "Charlie, what would it take? What would it take to prove Al's story?"

"The painting, for openers," he said.

"Not really. Eric Wall could explain it away. A maternal relative named Gruber had it in her family, or something else as convincing as Al's story. It's not enough. It could take years to settle, and Mr. Gruber may not have many years."

"A confession from one of the Waldmans, and we know Eric Wall, or Erik Waldman, isn't about to furnish it."

She nodded. "Gerde," she said softly.

Who might be a loony bird, he thought grumpily. "What's on your mind?"

"Some studies of children who were traumatized by the blitz of London. I had a dim memory, but I needed to pin down some facts. When you talk to Al you might say we're working on it," she suggested then.

"I want to talk to his father. I have some questions for him. For one thing, would he be willing to pay for an expert in old Dutch masters to examine and authenticate that painting?"

"One who is fluent in German," she added. "Written and spoken German. Or would it be in Flemish?" She thought a moment. "I know who would know an expert like that. Malvin Twining at Columbia. You remember Malvin, don't you?"

He didn't have a clue about Malvin, but it didn't matter. She knew everyone at Columbia University, he sometimes thought.

Then, decisively, she said, "Let's put together a list of questions and tell Al we'd like to see him and his father on Monday. I'll e-mail Malvin." She stood up and, without a glance at the remains of dinner on the table, she left.

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He decided to call Al Gruber from the kitchen phone in order to keep the cats away from the scraps of meat, which, given a chance, they would snatch and take behind the couch, or to the middle of the bed, or somewhere else he preferred not to have it.

One of the things he needed to know was how rich the Grubers had been. Al had said Waldman was penniless, and the Grubers were prosperous, but that could mean anything from food every day at regular intervals to a family fortune worth a bundle. He needed to know. Henrik Wall's story was that he had fled to Switzerland with a fortune. Where had it come from if that story was a fairy tale and the Gruber silverware and jewels had not amounted to much?

Another thing was information about the other couple who had made the escape attempt across the Wester Ems. Al's father had survived, possibly the whole Waldman family had made it. If there was a remote chance that the other couple had come through, there might be a possibility of tracking them down. He had little faith that it could be done after so many years, but he wanted to know.

And what, if anything, was wrong with Greta Wall? If she was a nut case, they couldn't rely on anything she had to say.

When Constance reappeared, she snapped, "Brutus! Get off the table!" The cat leaped down with a scrap of meat and fled toward the living room.

Charlie, still on the phone, raised his eyebrows and lifted one hand in apology. He had turned his back. Constance started to clear the dinner dishes, and soon Charlie wrapped up his conversation with Al.

"He says it wouldn't do us any good to ask his father questions. When he begins to talk about the distant past, he automatically lapses into German. So we'll meet Al and Bernice on Monday and hand over a list of questions that she'll ask, and she'll tape record every word he says and translate it." She nodded, cutting up the leftover meat. She put it on the patio and whistled; all three cats bounded outside, and she closed the door and sat down at the table.

"During the war," she said, "so many children were traumatized by the bombing, the rockets, strafing, all the horrors of modern warfare."

Charlie sat down opposite her and listened.

"There were a lot of refugee children as well as British children sent out into the countryside where they would be safer," she went on. "Some of them reverted to infantilism, to bed-wetting, autism, dyslexias of many sorts. Stuttering, babbling, ramblings, aphasia, verbal noise. Silence." She paused. "This was the part I thought I recalled, how they treated their speech disorders. Many, maybe

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even most children, got over their problems with the proper therapy, but some didn't respond. Then, in later studies, it was discovered that the children who responded most favorably were those who were treated by people like them, people with the same accents, the same language usage. Cockney children didn't respond well to the public-school-educated therapists; the upper-class children didn't respond to the Manchester accent, and so on. Not just the words, the language itself, but the inflections, the nuances, the references were important."

Baffled, Charlie listened, watched her, and waited. Her gaze was distant, abstracted, seeing a route that she could point out to him, but one that he never would find alone.

"I wondered," she said, "why Greta Wall didn't respond to therapy. They had money; they were in Switzerland, where there were marvelous doctors; they could afford the best to be had here in the States. Why didn't she respond? It wasn't physical damage, or she wouldn't have broken through her wall of silence in the fifties as she did."

She became silent, her gaze on the distant point only she could see. He covered her hand with his, and she came back to the present, back to him. Very softly he said, "They were using the wrong language."

"I think so. They were pretending to be Dutch. The two languages are so similar, adults, older children could easily go from one to the other, but she was too young. She had to hear the German of her infancy, her formative years."

"When she did start talking, they made her learn English," he said. "And she stuttered."

The next week was very busy. They met with Al and Bernice. She had inherited the gene that brought on premature white hair, but on her it was dramatically striking. Her nearly-black hair was streaked with silver. She had been a very pretty girl, and she was a lovely woman, tall and beautifully proportioned, with light blue eyes and a dimple that appeared and vanished as if by magic.

Their father didn't know they were pursuing the investigation of the Walls, Al said, and Bernice added, "It would break his heart to be rejected a second time, to have Erik deny him again. And if it is a mistake, then nothing is to be gained by putting him through it."

She looked over the list of questions Charlie and Constance had prepared, and nodded several times. "This I know. The other couple, they were elderly, and very wealthy. They had come to the Gruberhaus a time or two in a big expensive car, and she wore many jewels: rings, brooches, necklaces. Father doesn't know their names. Our family's jewelry consisted of wedding rings, a watch, a

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cameo, a brooch with a beryl, things like that. Trinkets by comparison."

Then she looked at Constance with a puzzled expression. "You want to know about snacks, what the children ate after school? Why?"

"Filling in the frame," Constance said. "And don't worry about translating anything. We have a translator lined up."

When they were finishing up, Al asked, almost timidly, "Charlie, of course, we'll pay whatever expenses there are, the translator, the expert, all of it, but how do you intend to get anyone in to examine the picture?"

"By invitation," Charlie said. "It's the only way to get inside that pile of marble."

After that they went to meet the expert Malvin Twining had provided, an attorney who spoke fluent Dutch, German, and French, of course. *Of course,* Charlie had echoed silently. When he heard the name of the expert on old Dutch masters, his impulse had been to reject him out of hand. Smith Duncan Symington. No man with three last names was to be trusted, he thought dourly. He was inclined to dismiss him out of hand a second time when they met. Not only did Smith Duncan Symington have too many last names, he was an insufferable little snob. He received them in his home office in a hotel apartment overlooking Central Park. They had to pass through security, be announced, then escorted to his floor and watched until he opened the door in person, and he stood five feet two at the most, and weighed at least one hundred ten pounds. His hair was shoulder length, silvery, and he was dressed in a pinstripe gray silk three-piece suit. He looked to be sixty. What he lacked in bulk he made up for in attitude.

He all but ignored Charlie and made a big deal of kissing Constance's hand. "Of course, my dear, if Malvin said I must see you, then I must. And, of course, there is no newly discovered van Gogh. There are a thousand, many thousands of faux van Goghs; a few swipes of a bright color on canvas, and lo, another van Gogh surfaces. But come in, come in. Tell me your little story."

The room he led them to was very large, with tables and chairs in primary colors that seemed to have been randomly scattered about, all from the bears' house of Goldilocks fame. Some too big, some too small, some just right. Two chairs here, three there, a sofa without a table within reach . . . Comic book furniture, Charlie thought; his distrust deepened when he realized there wasn't any real art on the walls, only posters.

Some he recognized: Brueghel's *The Tower of Babel;* a van Gogh, *The Potato Eaters;* Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights.* Others he recognized without knowing the titles or the painters, but they were all just posters. There was a white desk without a scrap of

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anything on it, and two yellow director's chairs before it, a high-backed carved chair behind it. On a platform, Charlie bet himself. When they were all seated, he could have transferred money from one pocket to the other, paying up. Smith Duncan Symington was now higher than he was in the low-slung director's chair.

Continuing to ignore Charlie, the little man gazed at Constance with a faint smile. "You said on the phone that you believe you have located a van Gogh. Please, tell me more."

Charlie got up from his chair; it was harder to get out of than he had anticipated, and he caught the look of amusement on Symington's face, and the stern look from Constance.

"Mr. Symington," he said brusquely, "you're a lawyer, aren't you?"

"Of course."

"Before we tell you our *little* story, I have to know if this conference is privileged even if we don't retain you, or if you decide you don't want to get involved."

"Mr. Meiklejohn! My, my, you are a suspicious one, aren't you? Yes, this is a confidential preliminary procedure, the sole purpose of which is to determine if there is anything for me to become involved with. Is that satisfactory?"

Charlie walked to a window and gazed at the park twenty floors below, scowling. What he would like to do, he thought, was tie the little man to a kite string and fly him down to the ground. "Good enough," he said. He strode across the office, picked up a real chair, and carried it back close to the desk and sat in it. "Here's the story."

He told it, omitting some details, and without mentioning any names. Symington's faced changed as Charlie talked, all traces of mockery vanished, the supercilious expression deepened to one of intent concentration, and he began to frown.

"What was the palette? The colors?" he demanded impatiently when Charlie finished.

"Pretty much like those," Charlie said, pointing to the poster of *The Potato Eaters.*

"It would have been before Paris. After his theology studies, after Antwerp, before he . . . I don't believe it! Another fake! I must see it! Where is it?"

Charlie leaned back. "Do we retain you, then?"

"Yes, yes. Of course."

"If it's genuine, Mr. Symington, what would it be worth?"

Smith Duncan Symington jumped up from his chair and crossed the floor to the nearest wall of posters, where he gestured. "You looked at these prints with scorn. I saw the look, I understood. Mr. Meiklejohn, inspired art is priceless. No man should own a painting by an inspired artist, a genius whose hand is guided by God;

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his work belongs to the world. But there are men of wealth who bid each other to astronomical heights, millions, many millions of dollars in order to possess such art, their pitiful attempt to acquire God's grace.

"Museums can't compete with their gold, but such inspired art belongs in a museum where the world can gaze at it in wonder and awe. And we should keep only these reminders, echoes of God's voice guiding the hands of genius, shadows of greatness."

A buzzer sounded from his desk and he hurried back to it, opened a drawer, and snapped, "Don't interrupt us." Then he turned back to Charlie. "Mr. Meiklejohn, I must tell you that it would be an incredible find if it is genuine. I also must tell you that I sincerely doubt that it is. With that understanding, how can I be of service?"

They talked for a long time without interruption, and finally Charlie said, "It's not enough to authenticate the painting. Stop there and, no doubt, Eric will come up with his own story and put it on the market to the highest bidder. We also need to prove that it belongs to Franz Gruber, and for that we need either Eric Wall or his sister Greta to admit the truth about their flight from Germany. Admit their names are really Erik and Gerde Waldman."

"How can you possibly make them do such a thing?" He sounded anguished.

"We're working on it," Charlie said.

They left soon after that, and out on the street again, Constance asked, "What do you think?"

"I think the little bastard's okay," he said.

A week later they returned to Smith Duncan Symington's Central Park South office. This time they were admitted by a very large blond man. "Ray Bromleigh," he said, stepping aside for them to enter. "Smith will be out in just a second."

Charlie raised his eyebrows. Smith? Bromleigh was in his forties and he looked as if he belonged in a football uniform, six feet two, over two hundred pounds, all muscles.

Just then a second door opened and Symington came into the room, almost dancing, it appeared. "Oh, good, you've met Ray. We have all the translations printed out for you. Mr. Meiklejohn; if I doubted your story before, and I certainly did, I no longer doubt. Listening to that wretched man's voice, his misery, it broke my heart. It still remains to be determined if the painting is an original van Gogh, of course, but that man told the truth exactly as he understands it."

Charlie cast an uneasy glance at Ray Bromleigh, and Symington smiled. "Ray's my right hand. He knows everything I know. He assists me in everything I do; he guards my person, and he

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will assist us in whatever plan you have devised. Now, please let us get comfortable and you tell me your plan."

"I'll let Constance fill you in while I go see a few people," Charlie said. "I'll be back in a couple of hours."

Actually he had only one person to see, Brian Posner, a Manhattan private investigator he used now and then, and as usual Brian had come through for him.

"Okay," Brian said, slouched in a booth at Tilley's Deli. They both had steins of beer and were waiting for sandwiches. "I got all the kids' license numbers, and the grandkids', those old enough to drive." He proceeded to tell Charlie everything he had found out about the Wall family during the past week. "One or another, or even a bunch of them, drop in over the weekends. Seems like they're a close family, keep in touch. One son, Roger, is out there a couple of days most weeks, Monday and Tuesday, then puts in time in his office at the Trade Tower. The old man is seventy-three, in good health, mostly retired, but not all the way, chairman of the board of umpteen foundations and such; they do business from the house, trading, meetings, whatever CEO types find to do. He's called a major philanthropist; funny thing is, the more he gives away, foundations, trusts, all kinds of things, the more money rolls in. Magic touch, I guess. There's a wife, Corinne, the sister Greta, and a lot of help, don't know how many. They entertain a lot, but Greta doesn't show up much in company. She has something wrong, a speech impediment or something that embarrasses her. That's the word, anyway."

He stopped to drink his beer. "And that's all I could dig up. If anyone in that crew ever did anything illegal, underhanded, even shadowy, I can't find a trace of it. Maybe with more time . . ."

Charlie waved that away. "That's more than enough. It's about an hour, hour and a half drive up there. Can you get out before dark? Check the cars in and check them out. If there's a procession of limos, for instance, I'd like to know, especially if they don't all vamoose before about two on Monday. We're paying a call on Monday, and I'd rather not walk in on royalty, or the secretary of state, someone like that."

Their pastrami on rye sandwiches came and they talked about mutual friends, old times, football. . . . Brian didn't offer any information about how he would stake out the Wall residence, and Charlie didn't ask for any. That was Brian's business.

He took his time returning to Smith Duncan Symington's apartment. When he arrived there, Constance gave him a thumb's up sign.

"Smith knows exactly what to do," she said. "We're all set."

"We agreed you should both call me Smith," the little man said,

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not quite giggling. "Ray is the one people see, of course, when we deliver material. I try to keep a very low profile—"

Ray Bromleigh laughed boisterously, and Smith did giggle then.

"But the point is that even if Mr. Wall doesn't recognize me, he might be familiar with my name," Smith said. "I'm somewhat famous in my own circles," he added modestly.

After they reclaimed their car from the parking garage and were on their way out of the city, Charlie asked, "Are you sure about him, that he'll work out?"

"Yes, I'm sorry you don't like him. I think he's a dear."

"He's as giddy as a girl primping for her first date. He's having a big adventure."

"He's drunk with the idea that he might actually hold an original van Gogh, that he might be the one to prove that it's authentic," she said quietly.

On Monday at one forty-five, Charlie turned onto the narrow road that led to the Wall estate. A black limousine with darkened windows was on the shoulder, its hood raised, a man leaning over the engine block. Charlie stopped at the side of the limousine; the side door opened and Smith got out and quickly moved into the back seat of the Volvo. My God, Charlie marveled, the little man had cut his flowing silver hair; it was beautifully styled in soft waves, and it was reasonably short. He started to drive slowly, and after a few seconds the limo followed.

When he turned into the driveway of the Wall mansion, the limo pulled off the road once more, this time blocking the driveway, and the driver got out to peer under the hood again.

Charlie drove on to the gate, opened his window to reach out and push the call button on a box mounted on a concrete block. A security camera was mounted on an identical block on the other side of the fence. No one in the car moved or made a sound as they waited for a response.

Then a tinny voice said, "Please identify yourself."

"My name is Meiklejohn. I have urgent business to discuss with Mr. Eric Wall. Tell him it concerns Hanover."

"I'm sorry, sir. Mr. Wall is not receiving visitors," the voice said.

"Give him my message. Inform him that if he doesn't see me in private, then I will have a press conference this afternoon that will bring grief to him, his sister, and his entire family. I'll wait," Charlie said.

He glanced at Smith in the rearview mirror. Today the little man was not giddy; he was pale and nervous. He looked as if he had not slept enough over the weekend; his eyes were sunken, with deep shadows beneath them.

A different voice from the speaker broke the silence. "I don't

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know who you are, or what you want, but if you don't leave now, I'll call the sheriff."

Son Roger, Charlie thought, the voice of authority. "I want half an hour in private with Eric Wall and his sister. It's extremely important that I see them now. I suggest that you convey that message to him directly. It's about Hanover, and I either speak to him now, or I go public. Tell him that and get back to me. I'm still waiting."

Smith was chewing his lip. They waited a minute, another minute. No one in the car spoke. The problem was that Charlie had meant what he said, he would go public, and he really didn't want to do that. He had nothing personally against the Wall family, and there was still the possibility that he and Constance were wrong on this one. In that case Wall probably would sue the pants off them. Maybe charge them with attempted extortion. He glanced at Constance, who looked serene and unconcerned, as if she didn't have a thought in her mind about lawsuits, civil actions, possible criminal charges. Another minute.

"Drive straight to the entrance," the voice of authority said then. "Don't stop on the way or open your car doors. Guard dogs are on the property and they will attack you if you attempt to leave your car before you arrive at the front entrance."

The gate swung open silently. In the backseat Smith made a strange keening noise and leaned back with his eyes closed. Constance put her hand on Charlie's thigh and squeezed gently, and he could feel the tension draining from him like water from a sieve. He drove forward.

They passed trees, then a wide velvet lawn, flanked on one far side by a tennis court, and a garden on the other. The smooth concrete drive gave way to a cobbled one, the cobblestones gently rounded, and then to a tiled entrance drive and finally a covered section in front of the entrance to the building. And it had been lifted, apparently, stone by stone from its site fronting the Grand Canal in Venice. Pale blue and pink marble, wide tall windows, marble pillars on both sides of several broad steps to the front double doors.

Two men stood on the top step watching their approach. The taller of the two was dressed in a short-sleeved T-shirt and chino pants, the other wore a black suit.

"Please stop there," the taller man said when they were out of the car. "Mr. Hoskins will look through your bags, if you don't mind."

Charlie shrugged, and they waited for Mr. Hoskins to make a feeble attempt at a search. It was very clear that he would prefer to be inside polishing the silver or something. He glanced inside Constance's purse; then, with an apologetic little smile, handed it

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back to her. His glance inside the slim case Smith had brought along was just as cursory and embarrassing to him. He approached Charlie and touched his pockets with a light and reluctant pat that was embarrassing to both him and Charlie.

Hastily he retreated back up the stairs, and the taller man waved him inside the house.

"I'm Meiklejohn, and these are my associates, Leidl and," Charlie paused for a beat, then said, "Smith. As I said, my business is with Mr. Eric Wall and his sister."

Constance inclined her head fractionally when he mentioned her name, but to his surprise, Smith made a deep, old-world bow of a sort that Charlie had seen only in movies.

"I'm Roger Wall. Come in. Half an hour, then security will arrive. My father will see you in his study." He was a tall lean man with sharp features, a long thin nose, clearly defined cheekbones, a rather jutting chin. He looked as if he had spent a lot of time out on the tennis court. Charlie had studied pictures of his father and he thought that was exactly what Roger Wall would look like in his seventies.

Roger stepped aside for them to enter a mammoth foyer with a black and white marble floor, black marble stairs on both sides curving upward, held in place by black marble caryatids of nymphs who became taller but no broader as the stairs ascended. Anorexic nymphs. There were many closed doors, and a hallway that continued back through the mansion. Charlie gazed about the foyer, then started to walk toward the left. He had studied the old floor plan, and although they might have installed heating and electricity, air conditioning, new everything, he was pretty certain they had not moved a ten-foot-wide green marble fireplace.

"Not the study," he said easily. "No hidden cameras, tape recorders, buttons to bring in the dogs. Over here somewhere. This room." He opened a door, and to his relief, there was the fireplace, and even more to his relief, the painting on the wall next to it. "Tell Mr. Wall we'd like to talk to him and Ms. Wall in here." He motioned to Constance and Smith to follow him, and entered the room.

Smith was very good, he had to admit; he saw the painting instantly, and his every instinct must have been spurring him toward it, but he merely stood clasping his black case with both hands and gazed at the floor. One tiny jerk of his body gave him away, not a sound, not another motion, just that one little start of excitement.

They remained near the open doorway, but Charlie took in the furnishings of the room with a swift glance. At one end there was a love seat and two chairs, all dainty-looking with carved spindly legs and rose velvet upholstery. On the opposite wall, thirty feet

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away, backed by a tall, wide window, there was another grouping, several carved chairs at a table that gleamed with inlay of some sort. Constance nodded slightly. There was other furniture, but those were the two sites they had chosen from studying the video.

At the approach of footsteps, they turned to see Eric Wall and his sister approaching. He was a senior version of Roger, tall, lean, upright, gray-haired, dressed in a sports coat and casual slacks, shirt opened at the throat; she had inherited some peasant genes: stockier, broader-looking although not plump, just heavier bones, a wider face, bigger eyes. She was wearing blue jeans and a T-shirt, boots. Roger was behind them.

Now Constance and Smith moved to one side, and Charlie stepped forward as the Walls entered the room. "Mr. Wall, I'm Meiklejohn, and these are my associates, Leidl and Smith. I am relieved that you agreed to talk to us."

No one offered to shake hands. Eric Wall inclined his head fractionally and Greta Wall looked almost panic-stricken.

Constance nodded and Smith made his deep courtly bow to Eric Wall, and then stepped up to Greta, lifted her hand, and pressed it to his lips. He stepped back and made another bow.

"Ms. Wall," he said, "I am honored to meet you."

Charlie was amazed; Smith had assumed a heavy German accent. He sounded like Henry Kissinger.

Roger had stopped at the doorway. "I'll be right outside," he said and pulled the door closed.

"Now you tell me what the devil this is all about," Eric Wall said.

Charlie glanced at Greta as if trying to make a decision, then he looked around the room. "Mr. Wall, I'm a private investigator and my enquiries into a certain matter have unearthed some pretty surprising facts." He looked at Greta again, and said in a lower voice, "Could we just step over there for a minute or two, let me give you a quick summary, before we get to the paperwork Smith has brought?" He started to walk toward the window, and Eric Wall followed.

"Ms. Wall," Constance said brightly then, "the gardens are so lovely. You have irises blooming! In late September!" She was on one side of Greta, Smith on the other. When they both began to walk toward the love seat across the room, Greta seemed helpless. She moved with them. "Are those special irises, or planted late, or what? Mine just bloom in May and June."

"Th-th-th-ey are reb-b-b-b-bloomers," Greta said. Her stammer was very bad. She looked past Constance in agonized embarrassment. Constance pretended not to notice.

"Rebloomers? I never even heard of them. Oh, I have to make a note, remind myself to look them up in a catalogue, or at a nursery."

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She and Smith maneuvered Greta to the love seat and seated themselves in the chairs at the sides of it. Constance groped in her bag for a notebook, and turned on her tape recorder; she brought out the notebook, made the note, slipped it back in her bag, and placed it on the floor between her and Greta. "Of course," she said, "growing up in Europe, you must have been familiar with many flowers we simply don't know about. I imagine childhood in Europe is quite different from childhood here in the States."

Smith leaned forward. "Bah! No child should have to grow up in America!" He looked at Greta with a grimace. "They feed their children cold cereal made from sawdust, and Tinkies." His accent was lovely, just thick enough.

Greta looked bewildered, and Constance said disdainfully, "I don't know what you're talking about. Tinkies?" She smiled. "Oh, you mean Twinkies, the little cakes? There's nothing wrong with them now and then. Children love them."

"Ach! They don't know. When I was a child, we went out in June and picked the little wild strawberries. One taste, like a little kiss from heaven in your mouth. Cook mashed them, not too much, just enough, and added a touch of sugar, not like here, not like Tinkies, just a touch. While they drank in the sugar, Cook made little pancakes, just so." He held up his hands to indicate the size. "Just so. Cook rolled the strawberries in the little pancakes while they were still warm, and we ate them. Heaven!"

"With b-b-b-butter," Greta said.

"Ach, the butter! Almost white, and so sweet! Like honey!"

Charlie and Eric Wall were seated at the inlaid table, Charlie leaning forward speaking earnestly, too softly to be heard across the room, telling Eric the cock-and-bull story he and Constance had made up over the weekend. Neither Charlie nor Constance had any idea how long he could stall Eric.

She said indifferently, "I'm sure they were very nice."

"Nice! Nice! She doesn't know," he said to Greta sadly.

"I remember the apple fritters!" he cried. "Ach, the cold wet fall, walking home in the rain, and the steamy kitchen with the apple fritters ready. So round and golden, hot, with honey poured on top."

"N-n-no, n-n-no," Greta said. "N-n-not honey. Sugar with cinnamon! Powdered sugar with cinnamon."

"Honey," he insisted. "I licked it from my fingers."

"The cinnamon and sugar melted together, like syrup," Greta said dreamily. "Always cinnamon and sugar."

Smith hit his forehead with the palm of his hand. "Dummkopf! Fräulein, you are correct. Honey on the liebkuchen! Warm honey on the hot liebkuchen. We would tell the girls to beg for a taste, just a little taste of the cookie dough, and Cook would turn away

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just long enough for us to put a finger in the bowl and have a taste, just so long. Citron and mace, cinnamon and . . . and . . . How do you say it?" He muttered a word in German.

Constance knew very well that the word he wanted was nutmeg; they had written this script together, using phrases and memories provided by the tape recording of Franz Gruber's voice.

"Nutmeg," Greta said softly, her eyes large and luminous, and very distant, gazing into a childhood from more than sixty years in her past. "He said raw dough would give us worms. Of course, it never did. Sometimes he let me grind the nutmeg."

"And when the sheets of liebkuchen came out of the oven, golden brown, puffed up just a little, then he poured on the honey. Always warm, from a little warming pot on the back of the stove." Most of this he said in his accented English, but some was in German.

Greta nodded. She said something in German.

"When she recognizes a single German word," Constance had told Smith, "sprinkle more of them in whatever you're saying, just now and then, a few. Don't overdo it." He was doing that now, lapsing into an infrequent word or a phrase in German, as if it was easier to recall the past in his native tongue. If Constance hadn't known the script, she would have been at a loss to follow the conversation now. Both Smith and Greta ignored her, leading one another through the maze of a lost childhood.

From across the room she heard Eric Wall's voice, harsh and cold, "This is preposterous! I tell you we had no relations by that name!" He looked ready to jump up, end the ridiculous farce. Charlie caught his arm and said something in an inaudible voice. He cast a glance toward Constance and she spread her fingers, meaning five minutes. Stall him for five more minutes. Here, at this end of the room, Smith and Greta were engaged in an animated dialogue, part German, part English. Greta was smiling, correcting him again. Constance reached down into her bag for a tissue, the signal for Smith to go into the next phase. If this was going to work, it had to be now. Eric Wall wouldn't grant them much more time.

Smith stopped speaking in the middle of something. He ducked his head, and his voice became mournful as he spoke in German. The phone call in the middle of the night, the hurried preparations, the flight. Constance caught the words "das boot."

"Das boot," Greta repeated, nodding. Then, "Das boot!" A torrent of German followed, she began to rock back and forth, staring sightlessly. "Hulga! Hulga! Herr Gruber! Nein, Papa! Nein! Herr Gruber!"

Eric Wall leaped up from his chair; Charlie caught his arm and held him back. Eric struggled, opened his mouth to yell out.

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"Don't call your son unless you want to tell him the truth, Mr. Waldman," Charlie said.

Ashen-faced, Waldman sank into his chair and watched his sister fight with the devils from the past. She was crying out, speaking incoherently, calling for Papa, for Mama. Calling Hulga. Suddenly she clamped one hand on her cheek and the other one over her mouth, and she stopped making a sound, stopped all movement. She looked catatonic: wide-eyed and paralyzed.

Constance knelt before the older woman and very gently took her hands from her face and held them both. "It's all right, Gerde. You're safe. You're safe now. It's all over." She spoke quietly, then, when Gerde remained frozen, she said to Smith, "Tell her. She's safe now, it's all over. That was a long time ago."

He leaned in to Gerde and stroked her cheek and talked to her in German. A shudder convulsed her, and her eyes shifted, another shudder, and she started to weep. Constance put her arms around her and held her while she wept.

Charlie released his grip on Erik Waldman's arm, and together they crossed the room where Erik stood helplessly by Constance and Gerde. Gradually her sobs lessened, and at last she said in a choked voice, "I want to go to my room now. Please, I want to go to my room."

Constance helped her rise, and walked with her to the door. Gerde didn't look at any of them.

"Do you want help? Can I come with you?" Constance said.

"No. No. I need to be alone now. To think. I . . . I need to think."

"Greta—Gerde, I'll come up and we'll talk. Rest now and then we'll talk," Erik said huskily. His sister nodded and opened the door.

Roger was in the foyer. "It's all right," Erik said to him. "She's had a shock and she needs to rest. I'll be out directly." He closed the door and faced Charlie. "What do you want from us? Franz sent you, didn't he? What does he want? Money? Retribution? Revenge?"

Before Charlie could speak, Smith blurted, "She said, Gerde said your father killed that little girl, he killed Hulga. He pushed her face into the mud and killed her!" The German accent was gone, his voice shrill, and he was deathly pale.

"She isn't the only one he killed that night," Charlie said bleakly. "He killed everyone who survived the shooting, didn't he? Killed them and stripped them of everything they had, papers, money, gems, everything. He became a wealthy man off those dead bodies. If he had been able to, he would have killed Franz Gruber, or did he think he had killed him?"

Erik Waldman closed his eyes hard for a moment, then he groped for the nearest chair and sat down. He had turned into a

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very old man. "He was mad with fear," he said after a moment. "He said shut up, shut up or they'll hear you. Shut up. But Hulga and Gerde were hysterical, Herr Gruber's blood was all over them. They couldn't stop crying; Hulga kept calling for her mother and father, for Franz, and he pushed her face down. I don't think he meant to kill her, but she couldn't stop screaming. Her mother saw, she was crawling through the mud, trying to get to Hulga, and she was crying. She was sick. They had to carry her, but she kept crying for Hulga, crawling in the mud, and he hit her. He said we couldn't leave any papers, nothing for the Nazis to find, because they would track us all down, our friends, relatives, everyone who knew us. They would find them all and torture them, put them in the labor camps and they would all die. He said when the tide ran out, between the tides, they would come in their boats and they would take anyone they found and kill them. They kept shooting up and down the shore, into the water. . . Searchlights, flares . . . The old man tried to pull himself up from the water, and he kept slipping back, and he collapsed. I don't know if he was dead. I don't know if his wife was dead, but he said we had to take their clothes, their papers, everything, leave nothing for the Nazis to find. And then Franz was dragging himself out of the water, clinging to rushes, to reeds, whatever he could grasp, and my father pulled him up. His head was bleeding. It was raining, so slippery, deep mud, steep. My father said Franz was dying and help get his clothes off. And he let him slide back into the water."

He had spoken in a monotone, staring at his hands on his knees. Abruptly he stood up and went to the window, with his back to them. "Gerde couldn't stop screaming, and he slapped her hard and said shut up, shut up, don't make a sound or they'll kill you. We gathered up everything and we ran until we could not run, and then we walked until daylight, as far away from there as we could get. He said we were no longer Germans, we were Dutch now, and German must never be spoken in our house."

He became silent.

"When Franz Gruber wrote to you, you turned him away. You kept up the pretense, didn't let the ugly past interfere with the good times," Charlie said brutally.

Waldman turned to face him, his own face now shadowed with the light behind him. "Mr. Meiklejohn, ever since that night there have been no good times. My mother was broken that night, she never recovered. Her death was a blessing to her. Gerde was silent for nearly fifteen years, terrified of our father, terrified of making a sound, and when she regained her voice, he despised her because she stammered. She never spoke to him unless he demanded a response. I determined that my own children would never have cause to hate or fear me, that they would never have

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cause to feel shame on my account, and then Franz wrote. I knew it would all crumble to nothing again, my children and heirs would live with the nightmare Gerde and I have shared ever since that night in the Wester Ems. I kept up the pretense."

"Mr. Waldman," Constance said, in what Charlie recognized as her professional voice, not cool exactly, but a voice that carried conviction firmly, "you were twelve, your sister just eight, children, powerless, caught in a timeless moment of absolute terror. You could do nothing to affect the events taking place, and afterward you could not undo them. Later, when you had a choice, you chose your family, a decision no one who has not had to make such a decision can either condemn or condone. Today, you have nothing to fear from Franz Gruber. He intends no harm to you or your family. What you tell your children only you will determine. If you tell them nothing about this visit, no one else ever will either. Please believe me, Charlie said at the outset that this is a private matter. It is."

He stared hard at her, then said, "What does he want from me? Why did you come?"

Charlie answered. "He wants what is his. The painting." He pointed to it.

Waldman turned his gaze to the painting. "Take it."

They watched Smith take down the painting and carry it reverently to the inlaid table, where he carefully removed the frame. Moving with the deft precision of a surgeon, he took off the brown paper from the back; the crackle of the brittle paper was the only sound in the room. In a hushed voice he read the inscription, first in Dutch, the way it was written, and then he translated it: ". . . this imperfect gift."

"I never saw the back," Waldman whispered. "I never even saw it." His voice broke. He turned away and walked stiffly to the door. "Perhaps you will leave now."

Charlie turned off the television in the small room they called their joint office, the room that held household records, odds and ends, and the TV. Constance had left minutes before, tired of the endless weather reports he kept tuning into. It was February, she had said reasonably; they could expect snowstorms in February. Blizzard, he had snarled, and now the wind was starting. He could feel it in every bone, a rising wind. He returned to the living room, where the fire burned hot and steady, and he regarded the poster that had arrived early that day. It was propped up on the couch: *A Country Inn,* identical to the one that hung in the newly renovated Gruberhaus.

The first week in October, Constance had received a gift from

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Gerde. Charlie had gawked when she opened it. "Roots and dirt," he had said in disbelief.

"Rhizomes!" She read the accompanying note: "We divided the rebloomers, and I would like to express my gratitude with this small token. It isn't too late to plant them, I think." She had wandered out to the back garden to find the perfect place for them, happy as a child at Christmas.

And now, today, another gift for both of them, the poster from Smith. He had called a week earlier. "We just got home, Charlie. Ray and I. From Amsterdam. It's beautiful in its proper home, The van Gogh Museum. Lovely!" He had babbled on and on, more giddy than ever, telling Charlie that Gerde had taken an apartment in Manhattan and divided her time between it and the mansion on the Hudson. She and Franz Gruber had renewed their friendship; he even cooked for her now and then. He, Smith, representing the Grubers, had negotiated the sale and they had been compensated adequately, he said, adequately. Charlie held the phone away from his ear and grimaced as the little man ran on; he already knew all this, but he had listened patiently. "I'm sending you a little present, Charlie, for you and your lovely Constance." He giggled, and Charlie held the phone farther away from his ear. "An imperfect gift," Smith said. "No more than a token." And today it had arrived, another imperfect gift they would have to find a proper place for.

The wind gusted; a geyser of sparks flared briefly, and he shivered. What would make for a perfect gift, he wondered. Just then Constance came into the living room carrying two steaming mugs of Irish coffee. He grinned. *"Mit schlag?"*

She laughed and nodded. She knew how much he hated it when the wind rose. And she knew a few cures. *"Mit schlag,"* she said, setting the mugs down on the table between their chairs.

Watching her, he had his answer to the question what would make a perfect gift, and it wasn't coffee. ○

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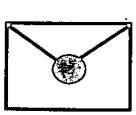

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Let's Hear It for Tomorrow

by William Bankier

Like many of William Bankier's other stories, this one begins with ordinary people in a not-uncommon situation, then takes off in the most unexpected directions, finally bringing the reader back to the beginning—but to a world completely changed. Mr. Bankier's been writing for us for thirty years—more compellingly each year.

The truth was spoken, as so often happens, in the heat of an argument. Molly said, "These days, I feel like killing myself."

This announcement frightened Clifford Kingman. Until his wife mentioned suicide, he had only been irritated. They were fighting about inconsequential things like the clutter on the dining room table and his failure to top up the transmission fluid in their mournful car. He said, "Don't do that to me. I've had one wife die. I can't go through it again."

Her quick retraction only underlined the menace. "I won't do anything. I only said I feel like it."

She got up from her end of the sofa and came to sit close to him at his end. The weight of her body against him, her warmth, changed his mood. A sigh left him like the ghost of his anger. She said, "I don't have anything. You have your writing."

"You write better than I do."

"Twice a year you send a manuscript to Carlyle's and they publish it. All I do is teach clarinet and have the occasional gig with Otis. And keep Sharon happy on the telephone."

"I don't know how to help you."

"I'm just moaning. Can't I moan?"

As he kissed her, she felt tears on his cheek. "Hey, cut it out. I didn't mean it."

But Kingman knew the truth when he heard it spoken. Underneath her busy, breezy way, Molly was ineffably sad. And why

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not? He was reasonably unhappy himself. After ten years of marriage, they had no children to act as buffers against the reality of their buried discontent. It was Kingman's second marriage. Back East, in Harper's Landing, Eloise had been diagnosed with cervical cancer, was assaulted with radiation, and had died all in a brief summer and autumn. Crazed with grief, Kingman had taken the insurance money and fled to California, where he knew a few people. One of them introduced him to Molly Hogan.

At the time, Molly was letting Otis Tate share her apartment, the same one-bedroom she and Kingman were living in today. It was their friend Sharon's building and it was her idea to have Molly and Kingman take over as managers when the incumbent drove his car into the back of a big-rig on the 405. The work was easy and their reward was free rent. This was useful since Kingman's book sales to Carlyle's were buyouts and the rate was not a lot of money.

Clarinet lessons were always scheduled in the afternoon. This left mornings clear for Kingman to pump out his daily three thousand words. He was now in the kitchen preparing tuna salad. Molly was in the back room with a student. She was an eleven-year-old, one of countless California girls who play Sousa in marching bands wearing a shako hat, pleated skirt, and knee-high white boots. Molly was teaching her to improvise. Today she was blowing a creditable chorus of "Bye Bye Blackbird."

The telephone rang. It was Otis Tate. "What's happening, Cliffie?"

"Tuna salad. You hungry?"

"Always. But I'm too far away. Is she there?"

"Listen." Kingman held the telephone in the direction of the music lesson.

"There's a wedding I've got booked. Can you ask Mollyo to call me?"

Kingman resented Tate's "Mollyo." He liked it and wanted to use it himself, but he could not because it belonged to Tate. "Soon as she's finished."

"You sound bummed, man."

"I suppose I am."

"You need to climb up out of all that headstuff you do. The world isn't in those pages. It's out here."

"You're right, Otis."

"Then do it, baby."

"Maybe I'll do it."

When the student left, Molly said, "Was that Otis you were talking to?"

"He has a wedding. Call him."

"I hope it's a Jewish wedding. I enjoy those tempos."

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In the days that followed, to the exclusion of almost everything else, Kingman thought about Molly. He remembered the evening she sat at the word processor and began banging out a story. The keys did not cease their clacking for over an hour. When she stopped at last, he was invited to take a look.

Kingman was fascinated, reading from the monitor screen. He kept holding his breath, then letting it out in controlled gasps. It was the beginning of a free-flowing story involving arresting characters doing astonishing things. Some of the sentences were so clever, he read them three times. Her effort ended too soon. After composing himself, he turned to where she was sitting, turning the pages of a magazine.

"You have to finish this."

"You like?"

"It's brilliant. Finish it." She was beaming. "I mean it. This is what you should be doing."

"You're the writer around here."

She never went back to it. She did not think well enough of herself. Kingman had been raised by parents who doted on him, so he had always known he was a good person. He was able to grant his subconscious mind the freedom to write. This pleased his subconscious, which allowed Kingman to be happy.

Molly, on the other hand, was an abandoned baby adopted by a couple who were religious fanatics. She could never please them because they saw her as a flawed human being. Rewards and recognition, if any, would come in the next life. It amazed Kingman that she had turned out to be the productive person she was. Because inside the worldly musician lived a disappointed child who carried a load of guilt, having failed to live up to her dead parents' expectations.

Molly came into the room where Kingman was dreaming and picked up the telephone. All of her regular numbers were preprogrammed. She punched one button after another, having short conversations with those friends who were in, leaving messages on the machines of those who were out. This was Molly's way of touching base with everybody she cared for, every day.

The last call was to Sharon. "Your building is still standing. I thought you should know."

"It's all your doing, Molly. How's your husband?"

"Great as always. He keeps writing his books. I don't know how he does it."

When the telephone was cradled to stay, Kingman said, "You're a better writer than I am."

"Don't start."

"And you know it."

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"You're the writer in this family."
"That chapter burst out of you. There must be more in there."
"I don't want to talk about it."

Kingman kept thinking about the problem. She had told him she felt like killing herself. This was a true statement, however much she denied it later. The woman was terribly frustrated, depressed. He thought of the tragic death of Eloise back in Harper's Landing. She died of cancer. But what brought on the disease? Nobody really knew. Kingman suspected such things might originate as a result of stress. Eloise, like so many women, led a life that could not be called satisfying. She lived to serve others, her husband, her children. She obeyed rules burned into her consciousness when she was growing up. In the end, her body rebelled and consumed itself.

Kingman had never forgiven himself for letting her die. Now here was Molly, warning him that the same thing, or worse, was happening to her. But in this case, it was not too late. He could do something to save her.

What could he do? He could get out of the way and let her write. Unless he did this, she could never cross the barrier erected inside her mind by those unappreciative parents. Her excuse was, "You're the writer in this family."

The idea, when it popped into Kingman's mind, seemed sane and logical. He must die. That would clear the decks for Molly to write. But not suicide. He did not have the courage to use a gun on himself, or to cut his wrists in the bathtub. Besides, that would leave a horrific mess for Molly to discover and deal with. And she would interpret it as another failure on her part.

No, there was a better way, a simpler way. He must arrange to have himself killed. Take out a contract on himself. He had money saved. He had read about people who would do it for as little as five hundred dollars. He could afford to pay a couple of thousand, which would see the job done well.

The final detail, the trick that confirmed the plan in Kingman's mind, came to him as he was going to sleep that night. In the morning, when he was bright and businesslike, he said to her,

"You have to promise me something." He was sitting at his desk with the current typescript in front of him. Molly was across the room, reading the morning paper, sipping coffee.

"Name it," she said.

"This book is three-quarters done. If anything should happen to me, you have to promise you'll finish it and send it in."

"I can't do that."

"Yes, you can. We both saw what you wrote last winter. Promise me you'll do it."

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"You're serious."

"Deadly."

"All right, I promise." She wet her finger and turned a page. "But nothing's going to happen to you."

The prospect of his own demise, in these special circumstances, put Kingman in a mood of anticipation. He had never feared death. It came to everyone—sometimes much too early and often under miserable conditions. But he had lived most of a good life span. The ending would be swift and clean.

And best of all, it would set his Molly free. After a period of grief, she would emerge as the writer she was born to be. No more depression, no thoughts of suicide.

All that was needed now was to find the professional to do the job. It was not something you could look up in the Yellow Pages. He thought of drifting around bars in the wrong part of town. But anything might happen there. He could end up talking to an undercover cop; what he was planning was illegal. Or somebody might beat him up and take his money.

There had to be somebody he could talk to, somebody who lived in the real world, not the never-never land inhabited by writers.

Otis Tate wondered as he waited for Clifford Kingman to show up. He'd sounded wired on the phone. Maybe even a little buzzed. But it was Mollyo's husband so he had to listen to what the man had to say.

From his table by a window of the quiet diner, he saw the writer drive along Venice Boulevard and park at the curb. He got out and fed the meter as if he had never seen one before. Each coin had to be inspected, both sides, before he fed it into the slot. Then he began approaching the diner slowly, looking at the sky, the ocean, the second floors of buildings, all as if he had arrived on the planet this morning. His face changed when he spotted Tate. Big grin, a wave, quickened pace.

"You want some coffee?" Tate said as Kingman sat down.

"No, thanks. I have to make this quick. How's the music business?"

"It's cool. How's the writing business?"

"Quite cool. Listen." Kingman looked both ways and lowered his voice. "This is not for me. It's for a friend. I said I'd try to find out."

Tate leaned forward and made his face receptive.

"My friend wants to get the name of somebody who can handle a contract."

"A lawyer."

"No. Somebody who will do it. For money. Kill somebody."

Otis Tate had seen his trombone player fall off the bandstand in

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the middle of a solo. He knew how to keep his face straight. "You want the name of a contract killer."

"My friend does."

"Have you told your friend not to do this?"

"He's determined."

"What kind of money?"

"Says he can pay two thousand."

Tate sat back and frowned at Kingman. "Do you know the victim?"

"It's some old crock who's ready to go. He deserves it. He's asking for it." Kingman cleared his throat. "It's cool."

Tate took time to finish his coffee. The writer's story was as phony as a six-dollar bill. But he knew how to handle it. "I can give you a name," he said. "But you never heard it from me."

"Of course."

"Okay. Here's his name and here's his number." The two heads drew close together as Otis Tate whispered the information in Clifford Kingman's ear.

"Normie Blazer? Your name was given to me by a mutual friend."

"Like who?"

"He asked me not to say."

The part-time hitman, who played the horses for a living, hung up the telephone.

Kingman called right back. "His name is Otis Tate. I was supposed to leave him out of it."

Blazer felt reassured. Tate was solid. "We can't discuss this over the telephone. Meet me at the end of the pier in Manhattan Beach at five o'clock. Carry just the sports section of the L. A. *Times*. Bring some money."

Kingman telephoned home. "I'm going to be longer than I thought."

"What's up?" Molly asked. In the background, a child with a clarinet was struggling through a chorus of "April in Paris."

"I've researched Venice. But I need to get the feel of Manhattan Beach. Are you all right?"

"As long as you love me."

"Oh, I do. More than you know."

"Hey, that's a good tune. I think I'll teach it to little Eunice."

Kingman went to an ATM and drew five hundred dollars from his savings. Then he extracted a *Times* from a vending machine, retained the sports section, and dumped the rest of it into a trash bin. He got on Sepulveda and drove south to Manhattan Beach.

A few old men were fishing at the end of the pier. Others were leaning on the railing, watching the water roiling around pilings twenty feet below. A younger man turned his head and observed

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Kingman browsing his paper. He was a stocky individual with an open face, serious eyes, and a stoical mouth and jaw.

"Anything interesting in the world of sports?"

Kingman had prepared a response. "Had you bet on number six in the third at Santa Anita," he said, "you would have made a killing."

Blazer liked the racing reference. "Did you bring money?"

"I brought five hundred. I'll pay two thousand."

"Let's have it."

Kingman handed over the wad of new twenties. "This will be easy money for you. I want you to kill me. I won't give you any trouble."

"Explain yourself."

"It's for my wife. Never mind the details. She'll be a lot better off with me gone. I don't have the nerve to do it to myself."

"One of nature's noblemen," Blazer said.

"I can do without the sarcasm."

"I meant it sincerely. This sounds like a decent thing for you to do." The hitman grinned. "A far, far better thing than you have ever done."

"An erudite killer!"

"You're lucky to find me in town. I was due to fly to London. I've got my ticket. Otis knows that. I'm surprised he gave you my name."

"Go explain Otis."

"Anyway, the job was canceled. The guy in London knew he was a marked man. He was so scared, he killed himself. Can you imagine that?"

Kingman's brain, these days, was supplying immediate solutions. "Fly to London as you planned," he said. "I'll travel on a separate flight. My death there will be more of an unsolved mystery."

Blazer liked the idea. He had been looking forward to the trip.

"Fly tomorrow. I'll fly the next day. Have you booked a room?"

"The Brisbane Palace in Earl's Court."

"I'll take a room there or close by. We'll meet and make a plan."

"You've thought of everything." Blazer could not help admiring this skinny old grey-haired dynamo with his shabby briefcase.

"Not quite," Kingman said. "I have to figure out how to say goodbye to my wife."

Molly looked Otis Tate in the eye. "This is a joke, right?"

"I wish. No, he asked me for a friend, quote unquote. He's going to have somebody killed." Tate winked. "But I stalled him. I happen to know the guy whose name I gave him is out of the country. So nothing can happen right away."

"This is not like my husband."

"Famous last words, Mollyo."

"I need you here when I confront him."

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"No, baby. You and I go back a long way. I'll start protecting you, and he will get hurt."

"I'll talk to him alone."

"You need the police, child."

"Would you testify? Would you give the name and number of your friend, the murderer?"

"We never even had this conversation."

"Then don't tell me police. I'll have to sort out Clifford by myself."

Kingman waited down the street from the apartment building, watching for Molly to leave. She took one of her aerobic walks most evenings as the heat of the sun was receding. He had decided he could not face her. What he had to say could be better presented in writing.

At seven-thirty, she appeared in shorts, tank top, headband, and walking shoes. How young and fit she looked! Goodbye, Molly! He would never set eyes on her again. The tragic thought was deeply satisfying.

Inside the apartment, Kingman packed a bag quickly. It was a small bag. He would not need much in England since he would not be staying there—or anywhere—more than a day or so. Then he sat at his desk and opened one of his spiral notebooks to a clean page. He wrote with his favorite pen.

Dearest Molly:

By the time you read this, I will be on my way. We will not be seeing each other again. Forgive me, I could not tell you this face-to-face. I don't have that kind of courage.

I am not leaving you for another. There is no other. There never could be. When you said you are feeling suicidal, it did something to me. It altered the state of my mind. Even the risk, however slight, of you leaving me alone is more than I can bear. I would far rather go myself and that is what I have planned to do.

You will be better off in the long run. Remember what I told you about my book in progress. Finish it, Molly. You can do it. Complete it and send it in. How different you will feel. A whole new world will open up to you.

My writing career is over. Yours is about to begin.

Love to you, dear Molly. Forever.
Clifford.

P.S. The car is parked down the block on the other side.

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Kingman left the notebook open where Molly could not fail to see it. Then, without allowing himself one more thought about what was happening, he picked up his bag, left the building, hurried to the taxi stand on the boulevard, and headed for the airport.

London was experiencing a dry summer. The sky was blue, the temperature mild, and the air smelled clean after the toxic L.A. mixture.

Kingman rode the Underground from Heathrow to Earl's Court. He found a small hotel a few doors away from the Brisbane Palace and checked in. It was midmorning. Feeling no jet lag as yet, he went outside and began to walk. Plenty of time to touch base with Normie Blazer that evening. The condemned man would eat a hearty dinner with his executioner as they decided the when and the where.

He began walking where his feet took him. London was made for walking. The streets were irregular; there was always an approaching corner with something new and different around the turn. He fell in love with the fronts of the buildings, their shiny windows, the iron gates painted glossy black, the broad, substantial doors. And there was always another pub with its antique sign. Some of them were just opened and, peering in an open doorway at round oak tables, smelling the hops, Kingman decided he would visit one of these places later.

It was eleven-thirty when he heard band music in the near distance. Quickening his pace, he hurried past a leafy park, turned another corner, and there it was, just as he had seen it in newsreels and on postcards, Buckingham Palace! Hundreds of people were gathered outside the tall iron fence watching a band drawn up in a huge forecourt. The musicians were playing a concert; he recognized the grand march from *Aida.* It ended and the crowd applauded.

Now the situation changed. Another band could be heard far off, playing the famous "Colonel Bogey" march used so effectively in the movie *The Bridge on the River Kwai.* As this band drew closer, Kingman realized what he was watching. They were changing the guard at Buckingham Palace!

"Christopher Robin went down with Alice!" he told himself as his heart pounded with childish excitement. "What excellent timing!"

The new band approached from a side street and entered the forecourt through a wide gateway. Here, some ceremonies took place, lasting only minutes, in which red-tunicked soldiers approached each other and there was much stamping of boots on pavement and swift pivoting around. Then the band that had been playing the concert executed a movement that put them in marching order. The drums flourished, a hoarse voice called "Queeeek

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march!" and they proceeded through the gateway and down the street, leading a platoon of armed guardsmen in scarlet tunics and bearskin hats. Kingman recognized this march, too. It was "Sons of the Brave."

Then, a surprise. Unseen by him until that moment, a smaller band of fifes and drums struck up a rattling, whistling tune and marched out of another gateway leading a smaller squad of guardsmen. This unit moved right past him so he could see every pink face of the young men in uniform. The pull was beyond resisting. He picked up the pace and began marching along the sidewalk in step with this cheerful band of men as if he was part of the exercise. He recognized this tune as well. It was, of all things, "The Wearin' of the Green."

They moved past the giant statue of Queen Victoria on her island in the middle of the traffic roundabout facing the palace, then on down The Mall with its red paving, heading towards an imposing structure which a guidebook would tell him was called "Admiralty Arch." But before they reached it, they swung a left turn into a side street, ending up at a barracks with a small drill square in front. Here, the band stopped playing, some arcane commands were issued, and then the squad was dismissed. Kingman turned away along with the crowd of bemused onlookers. His head was still resounding with the music, his blood flowing fast after the exertion of the march, his spirits lifted high. Walking further along the street, he came to a pub with its door open and, this time, he entered.

The place was busy, it was now midday. He pressed his way to the bar, took delivery of a pint of lager in a heavy mug, and made his way to a small table by the door. Here, the sounds and smells from the street blended with the beery atmosphere of the pub. The lager tasted just fine. He finished this one quickly and went back for another. While at the bar, he noticed a layout of cold meats and salads. He ordered something called a Ploughman's Lunch, which turned out to be a huge slab of aged cheddar cheese with crusty bread and butter and pickled onions.

Back at his table, eating and drinking, Clifford Kingman was confronted with an unexpected question that shot straight up from the depths of his subconscious mind. Why was he preparing to have himself killed when life was so deliciously entertaining? Well, he reasoned, it was because Molly was depressed. Her life was frustrating. And that was because she did mundane things that were not satisfying. Writing would satisfy her, it was what she was born to do. But she was blocked because her miserable parents had brainwashed her into believing she did not deserve to feel good about herself. She used the excuse that Kingman was

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the writer in the family. Q.E.D., if Kingman were gone, Molly would be free to start writing.

"What a load of nonsense," Kingman said aloud. Discreet English faces turned away. He resumed his monologue internally. He did not have to die. That was the last thing he need do. Literally. As for right now, any course of action would be preferable. He considered the situation.

Molly, by now, would have read the note and would believe he was gone. What a cruel thing he had done. But, as was often said, sometimes you have to be cruel to be kind. Soon she would take up the challenge of finishing his book. He knew the result would be a success. Then the barrier would be broken forever. He would reappear and she would forgive him and they would live much more happily ever after.

Kingman finished his second beer. There was a more immediate problem. This evening he would visit the Brisbane Palace and make contact with his paid assassin. Would Normie Blazer be willing to call off the project?

After lunch, he left the pub and walked into the spacious park beside the palace. A sign revealed that it was called, appropriately enough, Green Park. There were striped deckchairs scattered about the grass. He sat in one of them. Soon, an attendant came and collected from him a fee of twenty pence. Kingman put his head back and closed his eyes. He was certainly not in Kansas. Nor was he in Los Angeles or Harper's Landing. The feeling of being lifted out of himself and flowing into the atmosphere of the real world was strong in him.

Perhaps he slept. In any case, his rambling thoughts turned a corner and confronted a large and solid truth. Normie Blazer might not like the change in plans. The hitman, having been engaged to collect his money and perform a service, might resent being told it was a case of rain, no game.

Kingman decided he did not really want to see Normie Blazer ever again. He was sorry they had met in the first place. The reborn novelist stopped short of blaming Otis Tate for bringing them together.

There would be no dinner meeting this evening. Blazer could keep the five-hundred-dollar advance. Perhaps some day, he would call the number again and explain about the change of mind. Much later. When both of them had far outgrown the absurd plan.

Kingman could not return immediately. Molly needed time to do the work on his novel. No problem. London was vast and England was full of places to go. Tourists spent weeks here. So would he.

Paying off the taxi driver, then carrying his suitcase to Molly's front door, Kingman felt as if he was moving from dreamful sleep

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into cold reality. Or, like an actor returning to being himself, having finished playing several parts in a complicated film. Canterbury had been delightful. The beach at Brighton was mesmerizing, with the pier and the wave-capped Channel. The grey spires of Oxford were everything he had been led to believe. And he would never forget the Royal Terrace in Bath. The bustling, efficient train rides between locations had been a treat in themselves.

But now he was here. He should have telephoned ahead, no question about that. The shock of seeing him might cause Molly to fall down on the floor.

Turning his key in the lock, quietly letting himself inside, he was surprised to hear voices in the living room. Otis Tate was saying, "I'll miss you with the band. But I understand you now have more important fish to fry. And you'll always be my Mollyo."

"Thanks, Otis."

Kingman held his breath, leaning against the wall by the front door. It was like listening from the coffin at his own wake. Then he heard Normie Blazer's voice and realized it was nothing like that at all.

"I wish you'd take back the five hundred dollars."

"Keep it, Normie. My husband jerked you around."

Otis laughed. "Old Clifford. Did you have any idea he'd run off and hide one day?"

"I never thought he had that much backbone. He was always sort of a nebbish. But good, mind you."

Everybody laughed.

"Tell you the truth, I'm glad he did this. If he ever decides to show up, I'll tell him to his face."

"That's an entrance line if ever I heard one," Kingman said, walking into the room and dropping his suitcase on the floor.

"Speak of the devil," Molly said.

"Hey, Clifford," Otis Tate said.

Normie Blazer sang, in a respectable baritone, "You picked a fine time to leave me, Lucille . . ."

Molly stood up, came to her husband, and slapped his face so hard his eyes watered. "You gave me some bad times."

"I was trying to do the right thing. I hope you'll forgive me some day.

Otis Tate got to his feet, saying, "I think we should leave these two alone."

Kingman sat at the kitchen table, turning printed pages, reading avidly. Molly filled his coffee cup. "This is astonishingly good. How did you finish the book so quickly?"

"When you were gone and I thought I was alone, something

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clicked over in my mind. It was as if there were knots and they came untied. I sat down at the keyboard and I began rattling it out, going on from where you left off. It was easy."

"That's how it reads."

"In five days, I was done. I sent it off express mail, with a covering letter explaining what had happened. Your editor called me yesterday. She said things like, 'The best book yet. The ending is surprising and electrifying.'"

A year passed. Kingman froze. He found himself unable to get into a new book. Molly took over, drafting the plot for a novel and writing it in its entirety. The sales of this new work surpassed anything that had happened before.

Nobody at Carlyle's was surprised or bothered. They had not lost a Clifford Kingman, they had gained a Molly Hogan.

"I think we deserve an overseas holiday," Kingman said when they were dining out to celebrate the completion of his wife's second success.

"Are holidays more fun than working?"

"London is unforgettable. I was there."

"Was that before you died?" Molly gave him the confident grin that had become one of her favorite expressions.

Kingman took both her hands and held them between the candle and the wine. "It was before you were born," he said. ●

"Why is it you can always find money for something like this, but when I want to buy a little something for myself, you never have any!"

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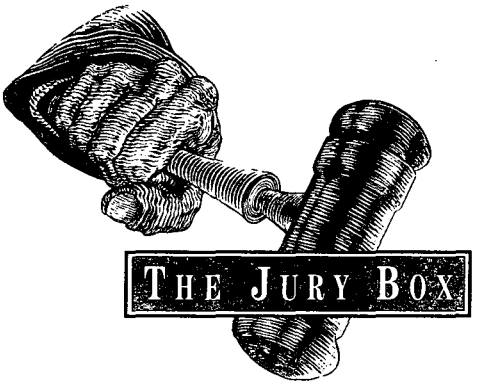

by Jon L. Breen

While volumes of collected short stories have never been as fashionable as novels and are relatively rarely reviewed in most mystery media, I feel a sense of duty to the shades of Frederic Dannay, Anthony Boucher, and John Dickson Carr, as well as you short-story-loving readers of *EQMM*, to cover single-author collections as exhaustively as possible in this space. And thanks mostly to the efforts of several specialist publishers who hang out in post-office boxes, such collections are cropping up in unprecedented numbers. The latest from Crippen & Landru (P.O. Box 9315, Norfolk, VA 23505) is Jeremiah Healy's *The Concise Cuddy: A Collection of John Francis Cuddy Stories* ($17 trade paper; $42 limited hardcover), gathering 17 tales about the formidable Boston private eye, while Five Star (P.O. Box 159, Thorndike, ME 04986) offers John Lutz's *Until You Are Dead* ($20.95), containing no less than 27 tales, most previously uncollected, by one of the short-story masters. If you like them way over the top, publisher Gary Lovisi offers a dozen of his own hypertough Vic Powers stories in *Dirty Dogs* (Gryphon Publications, P.O. Box 209, Brooklyn, NY 11228-0209; $15). And see also the first two volumes reviewed below.

**** Peter Robinson: *Not Safe After Dark and Other Stories,* Crippen & Landru, $16 trade paper; $40 signed limited. A list of the dozen best contemporary writers of crime fiction might well include the Anglo-Canadian Robinson, whose novels combine originality of plot, distinction of style, and a gift for readability. This collection of twelve tales, four from *EQMM* and most of the others from original anthologies, proves him equally effective at shorter lengths. His Yorkshire cop Alan Banks appears in three solid cases, most notably the reincarnation puzzle "Summer Rain."

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Several one-shot sleuths, including a Canadian private eye in "Some Land in Florida," also appear. Especially promising is Special Constable Frank Bascombe, a teacher and part-time cop who investigates a murder on the World War II British homefront in the previously unpublished "In Flanders Fields." Among the most memorable stories are twist-in-the-tail crime stories without detection, the title tale and "Just My Luck." Adding to the book's value are Robinson's introduction and story notes plus a checklist of his published work.

*** Carolyn G. Hart: *Crime on Her Mind,* Five Star, $21.95. Hart struck a popular chord with fans in her multi-award-winning series about mystery-book dealer Annie Laurance Darling, beginning with *Death on Demand* (1987). Annie appears in one story here, and another concerns her annoying mother-in-law Laurel's adventures on a mystery weekend. But the star of Hart's first collection, appearing in eight of twelve stories, is her other series sleuth, reporter-turned-journalism-professor Henrietta O'Dwyer Collins (a.k.a. Henrie O.), one of those fictional characters who charms on the page but would be hard to take if encountered in real life. The remaining two are non-series stories. All are solidly constructed by a reliable mystery pro. (The same publisher also offers the first hardcover edition of Hart's 1975 paperback original *Flee from the Past* [$21.95], a novel of romance, espionage, and Hitchcockian suspense that shows Hart was already a good storyteller in pre-*Death on Demand* days.)

*** Barbara Michaels: *Other Worlds,* HarperCollins, $23. This volume of two connected novellas presents a detecting club along the lines of Agatha Christie's *Tuesday Club* (of which Miss Marple was the keenest member), the Crimes Circle in Anthony Berkeley's *The Poisoned Chocolates Case* (1929), and Isaac Asimov's long-running *EQMM* dining group the Black Widowers. The difference is that Michaels's clubmen are real people, Houdini and Conan Doyle the most famous members, who meet out of their own time in a shadowy, fog-enshrouded netherworld to listen to accounts of psychic mysteries and offer solutions both rational and occult. The problems, concerning haunted houses, poltergeists, and troubled children, are so distinctively odd I'm sure they must be drawn from actual records rather than invented. The author has a sure hand with atmosphere and period writing styles, along with an enthusiasm for real detection that was somewhat submerged in her early romantic suspense novels under the Michaels name (less so in the novels written as Elizabeth Peters). Though you're free to accept the mundane solutions, the very nature of

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the club gives the supernatural ones an automatic advantage.

*** Anne Perry: *Bedford Square,* Ballantine, $24.95. A corpse turns up on a retired general's doorstep and several prominent London citizens are the targets of subtle blackmail threats in the latest strong novel about policeman Thomas Pitt, wife Charlotte, and their extended family of detecting helpers. In line with the author's usual social concerns, there's a vile and distinctively Victorian racket at the center of the plot.

*** Elmore Leonard: *Be Cool,* Delacorte, $24.95. One of the keys to Leonard's success as crime-writing satirist may be his prodigious range of pop cultural references—from Akim Tameroff, Louis Calhern, and Kate Smith to Aerosmith, Harry Dean Stanton, and Notorious B.I.G. in this sequel to the successfully filmed Hollywood comedy *Get Shorty*. In an especially entertaining scene, mobster-turned-moviemaker and now recording executive Chili Palmer tries to ascertain the differences among the steadily multiplying categories of contemporary popular music.

*** Stephen King: *Storm of the Century,* Pocket, $15. Screenplays and teleplays are rarely published in book form, even more rarely when they are new. But then this is Stephen King, whose shopping lists, if he chose to offer them, would no doubt find a publisher. During the titular storm, the close-knit residents of an island off the coast of Maine have more than the elements to deal with: Linoge, a mysterious stranger who has apparently murdered a local woman, is jailed in the back of town cop Mike Anderson's market. He has uncanny knowledge of some of the townspeople's secrets and as the storm rages on unveils even more frightening powers to menace the islanders and their children. The script, a cross between crime fiction and supernatural horror typical of its author, turns out to be almost as absorbing reading as one of King's novels. (The TV realization of the script, broadcast in February, did it full justice. Even the incessant commercial interruptions of the three-night ABC presentation couldn't quite ruin it.)

The second volume of *Speaking of Murder: Interviews with Masters of Mystery and Suspense* (Berkley, $12.95), edited by Ed Gorman and Martin H. Greenberg, is as rewarding as the first. Among the subjects this time: Dean Koontz, Robert B. Parker, Lawrence Block, Walter Mosley, Donald E. Westlake, Nancy Pickard, Michael Connelly, Margaret Maron, Edna Buchanan, Nevada Barr, Carl Hiassen, Loren D. Estleman, and Paul (P.C.) Doherty.

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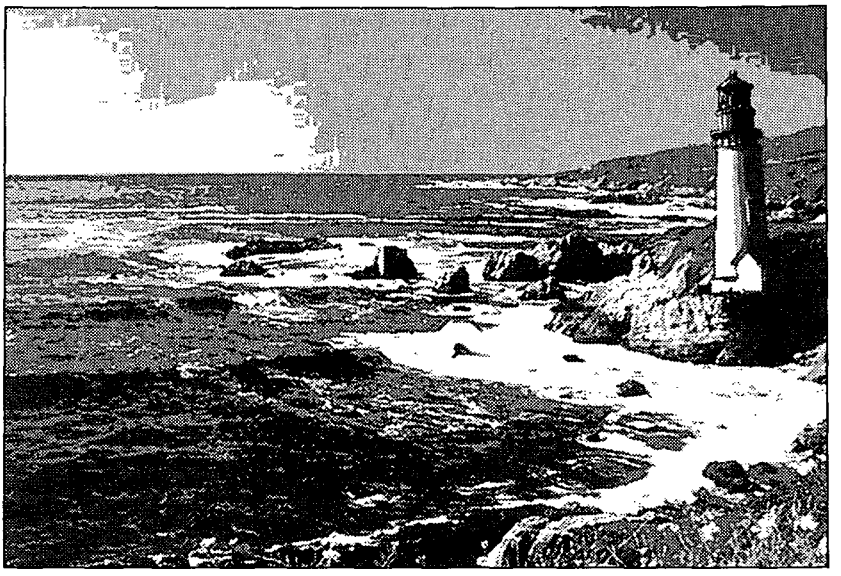

The Belle of the Ball Is Dead

by Donald Olson

A week before their twenty-fifth high school class reunion, Aline called Josie all the way from the Coast.

"I'm flying in, just for the day. I mean, twenty-five *years*. Makes you think, doesn't it?".

It makes me think why I haven't heard a peep from you in ten years, Josie thought. Not that she'd wanted to. She may have forgiven them both, Aline and Rafe, but that didn't mean she'd ever wanted to see them again. Strange to explain, they'd been best friends in high school. The yearbook had foretold their destinies. Aline was voted Most Beautiful by her classmates; her future husband, Rafe Crissey, now dead, was voted Most Likely to Succeed; and Josie Rudd, Most Original. "Meaning I'm the oddball," Josie was always quick to admit, even then having had no illusions about herself.

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Years later Aline had garnered the spoils beauty so effortlessly wins. Rafe had owned a computer firm in Silicon Valley. Josie remained the oddball, the outsider, the loner.

"Can you put me up?" Aline asked.

"Sure. No problem." Rory never used his room in the cottage in summer.

Josie picked Aline up at the airport. She was as effusive as ever, all hugs and kisses, to which Josie responded with habitual restraint. Under the California tan and the feathercut raisin-colored hair, Aline hadn't changed that much. One could still believe she'd been the most beautiful girl in Shore Acres High. Josie said as much, assuming Aline still expected flattery.

If we had to pick an *EQMM* author whose stories are closest in theme and setting to Golden Age mystery stories, we would probably choose Donald Olson, even though, unlike the most famous authors of that period, he is not British. His universe is genteel, his plots have their roots in small incidents, and there is a satisfying irony to his endings.

"I know better than that," Aline protested. "The belle of the ball is dead. I look like what I am, a middle-aged widow with a drinking problem and cellulite. *You're* the one who hasn't changed."

No flattery here, thought Josie, whose looks had indeed altered little. Same dull brown hair still worn in a ponytail, plain features inclined to heaviness, a body built for endurance, not for men's fantasies.

On the ten-mile drive back to the bay, Aline did most of the talking. "I still miss Rafe terribly, but I was never one to dwell on the past."

"I'm surprised you haven't remarried."

Aline giggled. "The options are still open. I'm not without male admirers."

"You never were."

"Tell me the honest truth," Aline said lightly but less flippantly, "you have forgiven me, haven't you?"

"For what?"

"You know what."

"For stealing Rafe? Water under the bridge. I could cheerfully have cut your throat at the time, but I should have known it was only a dream, Rafe being in love with me."

"I never *planned* it, you know."

Oh, really? Josie thought, but said: "My own fault. I had to get sick and like a blind fool suggested he take you to the prom. Farewell my love."

As if eager to avoid this conversational pitfall, Aline changed the subject. 'Tell me about that big boy of yours."

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Josie brightened. "Rory's okay. Fifteen now. All he thinks about is boats and fishing. No, that's not fair. He can be very deep. Very deep indeed."

"Like his mom."

"Not like his dad, thank God. *He* was never deep in anything but wine."

Freshwater Bay, luminous as a mirage, became visible in the distance, the lighthouse no more than a pale obelisk against the sky.

"All you told me before we lost touch," said Aline, "was that you'd met someone—a painter or something?—and then he was out of the picture and you were pregnant. Bad time, wasn't it?"

"Bad enough. Because of the lighthouse there were always painters in the summer. I got to know this one too well. And I suppose I was ripe for seduction. I was twenty-six, a virgin, and alone since Father died. The guy was a fair painter but a faithless lover. I didn't even know he was married until he said goodbye. Autumn came and he was gone. A month later I learned I was pregnant."

"You never told him?"

"Even had I wanted to, I wouldn't have known how to reach him. The guy was a scumbag, only I was too naive, too bedazzled, to realize it."

"Poor Josie."

"No. Rory made up for everything. Father had left me the keeper's cottage and the lighthouse, of course. And some insurance. I do a bit of part-time home care for the elderly, through an agency. We do okay."

They passed through the small town of Shore Acres, Aline oohing and aahing about how nothing seemed to have changed in twenty-five years, and along the shoreline to the lighthouse and keeper's cottage. Built of native fieldstone, they stood on a bluff overlooking that most majestic of the Great Lakes. The lighthouse was cone-shaped and rose over a hundred feet above its solid rock base. Built in 1829, it had been out of service since 1872, when the Lighthouse Board sold it to Josie's grandfather.

"How the kids envied you, living here," said Aline, climbing out of the Jeep.

"Really?" said Josie drily. "Was that the secret of my popularity?"

"You could have been popular if you'd made the effort."

Josie reached for Aline's bag. "This all you brought?"

"All I needed. Gee, won't it be fun seeing all the old gang?"

"I wouldn't have dreamed of going if you hadn't been coming."

The keeper's cottage was charmingly nestled among bright-colored annuals and covered in ivy. "For what it's worth," said Josie before going in, "Rory doesn't know the truth about his father. He knows he was a painter, that's all." She pointed up at the lighthouse. "Remember what fun we used to have up there? Teenage Rapun-

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zels—without the golden hair. Rory's made the watch-room into his private hideaway. Only in the winter does he sleep in the cottage."

"Josie! Let me sleep up there tonight. Please?"

"Are you serious?"

"Honey, I've slept in stranger places. Do let me."

Josie said it was okay by her if Aline thought she could still manage all those stairs. "I haven't been up there in years, ever since an accident with the Jeep left me with a bum knee."

"Rory won't mind?"

"He'll be out fishing until the wee hours. He can sleep in the house for one night."

Josie was amused to observe the impression her son made on Aline. Clearly, she could still muster the charm in the presence of an attractive young man. Rory looked older than his years, perhaps because of his manly build and the gravity of his expression. If there was still a boyish prettiness to his face with its well-molded lips and long-lashed, deep-set brown eyes, this was more than offset by the visible play of muscles below that tanned skin.

"Pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Crissey," he murmured shyly, with a smile as reserved as his mother's.

"Aline, please. Your mom and I are such old friends I feel like an aunt."

Rory's face betrayed no hint of displeasure at the idea of Aline sleeping in the lighthouse. All he said was, "No problem."

Josie said they'd have an early lunch. "Then Aline wants to call up some old friends."

As Rory walked ahead of them with Aline's bag, she leaned close to Josie and whispered: "My God, he's gorgeous! A heartbreaker."

"Long as he never breaks *my* heart."

The cottage was furnished with antiques and more comfortable modern pieces covered in bright chintzes. Aline was fulsome in her praise. Everything was either "adorable," "precious," or "charming." While she freshened up, Josie fixed a simple lunch of lentil soup, a fruit salad, and home-baked bread. "I've some wine," she said when Aline rejoined her. "Unless . . .?"

Aline giggled. "Honey, I was only joking about the drinking problem. Well, almost joking. I haven't reached the stage of drinking before breakfast. Yes, wine, please. It's an occasion."

Aline did most of the talking at lunch, and when it was over Rory went back to working on the boat engine he was overhauling. From the kitchen Josie heard squeals of girlish laughter from the living room as Aline chatted with friends she hadn't known since school days. Josie felt a shade of pique, still conscious of having been an outsider, of never having been pledged to a sorority or been a member of the inner circle.

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Nor was she certain even now, despite what she'd said, that she had ever truly forgiven Aline for stealing Rafe Crissey away from her. She had loved Rafe with a passion never duplicated until the painter had so easily overcome her defenses during that magical summer so long ago. And Rafe had loved *her,* she was sure of that, had given her his class ring and spoken of marriage once he'd finished college.

When Rory was born, Josie had even pretended to herself that Rafe was his father. More than that, when Rory had first begun asking her about his father she'd said nothing about the painter's deceit and betrayal. Rory grew up believing that the only reason he had no father was because one of his mother's friends had stolen him from her, seduced him with all the wiles of a witch in a fairy tale.

To Rory, she never mentioned the treacherous friend by name. She was only "the witch." "You'd have a father if it weren't for the witch," she would say. "She was beautiful and he was weak. He might have been a great painter if she hadn't destroyed him. He died regretting with all his heart that he'd deserted us. He was a fine man, you must always remember that." Josie never mentioned the painter or Rafe Crissey by name. He was only "your father."

By converting reality into myth, Josie felt that she was protecting herself against any guilt her son might attribute to her as he reached the age of reason, and by creating the role of victim for Rory's father, she sought to impress upon the boy's mind the image of a father figure Rory would not altogether despise.

Eventually, as time and life had healed the festering wound of betrayal, as her hatred of Aline and Rafe had evaporated, leaving only a philosophical acceptance that what had happened had been all for the best, it was too late to tell the truth and destroy the myth.

The truth, she'd reasoned, could only confuse her son; the lie could have no harmful consequences.

In the early afternoon the three of them went for a long walk along the shore, where the midsummer humidity was less oppressive. Unmindful of the stony beach, Aline took off her shoes and waded in the surf. At one point she paused and looked back at the lighthouse.

"From here it looks like a castle by the sea, a tower in a fairy tale. Oh, Rory, how lucky you are to live in a castle by the sea!"

Rory's smile seemed to deride the extravagance of this notion. "It's no castle. It's only an old lighthouse on the lake."

"Shame on you. Don't you ever make believe?"

Later, Rory drove Aline into town, where she'd arranged to visit a few of her old sorority sisters, and late in the afternoon he picked her up for the drive back to the bay. As they came in sight of the lighthouse she said, "I really envy your mother, Rory. My husband and I never had any kids. I feel the loss."

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"Mom says you're rich. I guess that makes a difference."

"For some things money makes no difference whatsoever. Your mom's a fine woman, Rory. You must never do anything to hurt her."

"Me? I never would. She's been hurt enough."

"By your father, you mean?" Aline forgot for a moment what Josie had told her about the boy's ignorance.

"Not by *him*. It wasn't his fault what happened. He was a terrific guy."

"I'm sure he was."

Josie had prepared dinner for Rory by the time they got back. "While Aline and I are gone, you'd better make sure your hideaway is all shipshape." Adding, with a laugh: "I've not been up there in ages. Goodness knows what sort of housekeeper he is. You're quite sure you want to spend the night up there?"

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," said Aline with a wink at Rory.

"We'd better start getting ready," said Josie. "Drinks at seven. Dinner at eight."

Getting ready took Josie no more than fifteen minutes. When Aline finally joined her, Josie felt a twinge of that old envy.

"I thought you said the belle of the ball was dead. My God, that dress!"

Aline simpered. "Too dressy for the occasion, is it?"

"I don't even own a long dress. Nor was I about to buy one for this one night."

"You look lovely, really. It's not Prom Night, after all."

"I missed the prom, remember?" said Josie with a playfully wicked gleam in her eye. Aline looked a trifle taken aback but managed a light moue of remorse.

"Only joking," said Josie.

On the way to the Shore Acres Yacht Club, where the dinner was to be held, Aline shared with Josie some of the gossip she'd heard while visiting her girlhood chums.

"Most of them said they hadn't set eyes on you in years. I thought that was funny, it being such a small community."

"I rarely go into town. Rory does most of the errands."

"Does he have a special girlfriend?"

"No girlfriend at all," replied Josie, as if this were a source of maternal satisfaction. "His boat and his fishing take up most of his time."

"He seemed, from what he said, very protective of you."

"I suppose he is. As I am of him. He's all I've got."

"Which is more than I've got," Aline replied in a faintly injured tone.

"But not more than you've *had*."

"Good God, I know you no longer hate me, but I should hope you don't still envy me." And then in a sharper tone: "Believe it or not,

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you were lucky. About Rafe, I mean. Life with him was no picnic. I don't mean he was all work and no play. He did his share of playing—but not with me."

Josie nearly slammed on the brakes. "You're kidding."

"Far from it. If he hadn't had the coronary we would very likely be divorced by now."

"I'm sorry," Josie said. "I truly am."

"Oh well, so neither of us won the blue ribbon. We've had our consolation prizes."

Arriving at the yacht club, Aline, taking Josie by the hand, made a beeline for the bar. "We need a bit of alco-moral support before facing this bunch."

After that it was no more than Josie had expected, and that which she would cheerfully have forgone. Hypocritical effusions of joy at discovering nobody had changed a whit. All it lacked was a maudlin chorus of the class song, Josie thought. Immune to the bogus enchantment of it all, she played the game with a wry, fixed smile, fortified by enough gins and tonics to bear the seemingly endless festivities without breaking out in an itch.

On the drive back to the bay, Aline looked rather like the Homecoming Queen caught in the scrimmage, lipstick smeared from all those kisses, eyes mascara-stained from all the tears. In an alcohol-husky voice she kept repeating that she wouldn't have missed it for the world.

"Once in twenty-five years is enough for me," Josie retorted, concentrating on the road ahead. She wasn't used to drinking and was sure she'd feel rotten in the morning.

Rory was watching television when they got back to the cottage. "Have a good time?" he asked his mother.

"Simply divine," she said, muting the satire, longing for her bed. "Rory, you'd better hold on to Aline going up all those stairs."

Good advice, as only now, seeing her draped across the sofa with the relaxed, boneless look of a cat at ease, her gaze sultry and unfocused, did Josie realize how many drinks Aline had consumed before, during, and after the dinner.

But first, black coffee seemed the appropriate nightcap.

"And now goodnight, Aline. Feel free to sleep in as late as you please tomorrow. Your flight doesn't leave till one."

Somewhat revived by the cool night air, Aline shook off Rory's arm as he would have guided her along the short walkway to the lighthouse. With one hand she made a sweeping gesture toward the star-filled sky.

"I can't wait to see the moon from up there. The moon on the water."

"Not possible," Rory said. "The watch-room, where you'll sleep, has no windows. No ladder anymore from the watch-room up to

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the walkway around the lantern. Light and ventilation come from up there but there's no access."

They entered the lighthouse through a door into the work room and up a short flight of stairs to the base of the stairway spiraling up the wall of the conical tower. Following close behind her with her bag, Rory was positioned to catch Aline if she were to lose her footing on the long climb to the watch-room.

He wondered if Aline would change her mind about spending the night there once she saw how small the quarters she would occupy were. Instead, she uttered a squeal of delight as soon as Rory switched on the light. "How cozy you've made it, Rory. I don't blame you for liking to sleep up here. But how much smaller it seems than when we played up here as kids."

A narrow bed filled the center of the room. Aside from this, there was only a tiny cupboard, a low cabinet or bureau, and a bookcase filled with paperbacks. After a quick look around, Aline sat down on the bed while Rory deposited her bag on one of the open cupboard shelves. He turned to find her watching him with an enigmatic smile.

"Your mom said you don't have a girlfriend. I'll bet you do. I'll bet you sneak her up here when Mom's not home."

"No, I don't," he replied gravely, unsmiling, embarrassed.

"You don't sneak her up here?"

"I don't have a girlfriend."

"Incredible. A young stud like you. Hard to believe you're only fifteen."

The way she kept looking at him with that languid, unwavering stare made him acutely uncomfortable. "If there's nothing else you need, I'd better get back down."

"Dear boy, if I told you what I *need* . . . Come sit here beside me. Let's talk. I don't feel the least bit sleepy now."

Jeez, he thought, I don't believe this. Is she hitting on me? For though inexperienced, he was not at all naive.

He moved away to the bookcase. "If you should feel like reading . . ."

"What's that?"

"What?"

"Picture on the top shelf. I can't quite make it out."

Rory picked up the enlarged snapshot in a simple frame and handed it to her.

"It's a picture of Mom and—"

"Rafe! My husband. Well, he wasn't my husband then. When that was taken he was sweet on your mom—until he caught a gander at me in my blue chiffon prom gown."

Rory gave a short derisive laugh. She was either drunk or blind. "You got it wrong. That's my dad. He was an artist."

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"Oh, sugar, you think I don't recognize my own hubby?"

With a sudden clarity of vision, Rory knew who she was.

Aline was the witch.

Aline was the woman who had ruined his father and caused all the pain his mother had suffered. Nor was he wrong about her. He wasn't imagining it. She wanted to do the same to him. Was trying to seduce him as she'd seduced his father. How could his mother have allowed her to come here? How could she have forgiven her?

Rory reached down and snatched the picture from Aline's hand. She uttered a faint cry of surprise at the violence of the gesture.

"Goodnight," he said tightly, hardly able to speak. Aline's laughter followed him as he moved quickly to the door. As he shut it behind him he thought he heard her call after him, "Sweet dreams, honey-boy."

He turned the key in the lock and dropped it in his pocket.

In midmorning Rory drove his mother beyond the town to the home of one of the clients of the agency for which Josie worked on a part-time basis. For two hours she would do the old lady's chores and prepare her lunch before Rory came back for her. She was waiting on the doorstep when he arrived. "You're very quiet this morning," she said.

"Just thinking."

"About what?"

"About you."

"What about me?"

"That you're a saint."

Josie laughed. "Whatever put that notion in your head?"

"I thought only religious people were that forgiving."

"Goodness, I've no idea what you're talking about."

"Nothing. Forget it." And then he added, as if it were an inconsequential afterthought: "By the way, she's gone."

"Gone? You mean Aline?"

"She was sorry not to get to say goodbye. She wanted to stop in town for some shopping before going to the airport. I just got back in time to pick you up."

Josie felt no sense of affront. It was just like Aline. "Good. I hate goodbyes."

Later, working on his boat, Rory looked up at the lighthouse, at the ubiquitous gulls wheeling and diving around the tower. One could imagine their screeching cries sounded almost human at times. Not that any human cry could be heard from the tower itself.

He looked out at the choppy gray surface of the lake, knowing what must eventually be done. But not yet.

How long, he wondered, could a person live without food and water? ●

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THE ACID TEST

by Ian Rankin

There was no great excitement when the body was first discovered.

It had been found during excavation work beneath Edinburgh's Old College. Fire prevention: They were installing a new sprinkler system, requiring the construction of a water-holding tank in the bowels of the quad. As one undergraduate had been heard to mutter: "Waste of money. Long time since any heat was generated in this place."

"He meant intellectual heat, of course," Professor Sandy Gates explained to Inspector John Rebus.

"Of course," Rebus said.

They were in one of the tunnels that ran beneath Old College, probably with James Thin's bookshop somewhere above them. The skeleton had been found here, covered with a thin layer of earth and rocks. And though the story had generated only a couple of paragraphs on one of the *Scotsman*'s inside pages, there was interest among the university academics—along with a certain amount of bickering over territory. The archaeologists were claiming the skeleton as their own, while historians wagged their fingers and shook their heads. The lawyerly figures in Old College had a case of their own to offer. But for now, it had been decided, the whole collection of bones and dust should be left in the hands of Professor Gates. And of course there had to be police involvement, too, at least until it could be established that there had been no foul play.

"Not my sort of thing," Rebus said, kicking at a stone. Arc lamps had been set up by the workmen and threw huge spiralling shadows over the vaults.

Ian Rankin has won many mystery awards, including Britain's Gold Dagger. His new novel, *Dead Souls* (St. Martin's), featuring the popular Inspector Rebus (of this story), will be published here this fall. In the U.K., it is already number three on the charts (after Grisham and Cornwell!). Mr. Rankin's books occupy seven of the top ten spots on Scotland's bestsellers list.

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"There are miles of these tunnels, you know," Gates said. "Didn't realise there were any here, though." He paused, looked around. "This is the spot."

The skeleton had been exhumed, photographed, and removed to the pathology lab. As head of the Pathology Department, Gates had no intention of letting anyone but himself examine the remains. He crouched down, one hand on the ground to help balance his huge frame.

"One thing," he said. "Not much in the way of clothing. A few scraps of some blue material."

"Think the rest perished?"

Gates shrugged. "Depends how long the poor devil was down here."

"Your best guess?"

"A hundred, maybe two hundred years. The cloth's gone for analysis." He glanced up at Rebus. "We probably won't be able to narrow it down to a date and time."

Rebus smiled. "Then let's hope there's no need for a murder inquiry."

Gates nodded. "Witness statements would be a problem." He paused. "Unless you have a Ouija board handy."

Rebus was pointing to a section of wall. "Is that it?"

"That's it," Gates confirmed. The reason they were down here: the writing on the wall. Rebus held a torch close to the scratch marks. Even so, they were barely legible.

"Someone had sharp eyes."

"Wish I could take the credit," Gates said. "But it was one of the workmen."

"You think the writing connects with the body?" Rebus ran the torch over the wall, seeking more clues.

"Judging by position, I'd have to say yes. The scratches are less than a foot from where the corpse's hand was uncovered."

Rebus looked again. Four capital letters, spelling out the word ACID.

"What's acid got to do with it?"

The two men were in the pathology lab. It hadn't been thought necessary to transfer the skeleton to the mortuary—there'd be no postmortem in the usual sense. The bones had yet to be cleaned, though samples of bone and soil had been sent to one of the specialist labs.

Professor Gates shrugged at Rebus's question. "Intriguing, though, isn't it?" He pointed to the skull. "No signs of damage or injury." He ran his hand down the rib cage. "No obvious breaks or fractures. Nothing consistent with a violent demise."

"Doesn't mean he wasn't killed."

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"You're thinking poison?"

"Or acid, something that would strip the skin away."

"Hmm." Gates sounded unconvinced.

"What else could the message mean?"

"I agree it's unlikely our friend died from natural causes. Looks to be the skeleton of a young adult male. Probably a fairly healthy specimen. Look at the teeth: They're intact. Others know more about the history of dentistry than I do, but I'm willing to bet if he'd been poor or malnourished, teeth would have been missing."

"Well, whatever happened to him, someone buried the body."

"But that might have been later. Maybe to avoid a scandal."

"What sort of scandal?"

"Corpses found on college property—hardly a good advertisement. Could be he committed suicide."

"In a tunnel? It's an unlikely setting."

Gates sighed. "You know me, John. I'm not given to speculation. And if this were a contemporary case, I'd hold my tongue . . ."

"But?"

"But seeing how we're dealing here with a miscreant who'll never be caught or tried, and probably never identified in the first place, I'd make the assumption that our friend here met an unnatural death. And poison would be my guess."

Rebus was thoughtful for a moment. "So what now?"

"You're making it your business?"

"Unlawful killing, Professor. Can we get a fix on the deceased's age at time of death?"

Gates nodded. "Dental forensics can do wonderful things. I'll remove a tooth or two for analysis." He turned to his colleague. "And meantime we wait?"

"We wait," Rebus agreed.

They waited. The world turned, and fresh cases filled their days. A stabbing, a suicide leap. Rebus had a few domestics to sort out, a court case to attend. After giving his evidence, he bumped into Professor Gates.

"The McMurdo case?" Gates guessed. Rebus nodded. Gates explained that he'd already given his own evidence.

"Any progress with Piltdown Man?" Rebus asked as they walked from the High Court.

"A little. The scrap of cloth yielded something. Its age, for one thing. Best estimate is mid-nineteenth century. The material is cotton, maybe underwear of some kind. Long johns or whatever they wore back then."

"So he was buried in just his underpants?"

"An educated guess, I believe. From the tooth, we're talking about an age anywhere between mid teens and mid twenties."

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"So a student rather than a lecturer?"

"Or someone from outside."

"An outsider who knew about those tunnels?"

"Ah, but only the killer needed to know."

Rebus chewed his lip. "True."

"Maybe there was work going on. One of the workmen at the time . . . ?"

"Buried in just his underwear?"

"To make identification more difficult."

They were outside now. The day was clear and sunny, the buildings radiant. Office workers were out hunting for lunch.

"The other clothing couldn't just have disintegrated?" Rebus asked.

Gates shook his head. "We'd have found buttons, some fibres."

"Who made those scratches? The victim, right?" Gates merely shrugged. "Let's assume it was. What would he be trying to tell us?"

"The identity of his killer?"

Rebus nodded. "But the body was buried." They'd stopped walking. Pedestrians around them, catching snatches of conversation, turned their heads to stare. "The body had to be buried *after* the scratches were made."

"You have a theory?" Gates half-smiled. He guessed Rebus had been busy late into the night, thinking the case over.

"The body's left in the tunnel. Then the killer thinks better of it and comes back to bury it. He doesn't want it found. Maybe he removes the clothing at the same time."

"But is too delicate to remove everything?"

Rebus nodded. "Someone with a shred of decency. But here's my point . . . between times, the victim wasn't quite dead. There was enough spark for him to pick up a stone and scratch the message."

"And the killer didn't see it?"

"By candlelight, no. It was hard enough with arc-lamps and torches." He looked to Gates, who nodded agreement.

"Which leaves us not a great deal more enlightened," the pathologist added. Then he saw the twinkle in Rebus's eye. "Except that you've done a bit more digging."

But Rebus shook his head. "I'm no archaeologist, Sandy." He paused. "But I know someone who is."

Which wasn't strictly true: Meg Gilfillan was no archaeologist, but she *was* the university's archivist. Rebus visited her in a third-floor office in Buccleuch Place.

"I've been following the story," she said, peering over her glasses. There were three desks in the room, each covered with maps, plans, and newspapers. She'd lifted a pile of bulging folders from a chair so that Rebus could sit down.

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"Fascinating," she said, looking at him as though *he* were the object of her studies. "Your phone call was spot on. There was building work going on at Old College for a good part of the late eighteen hundreds." She saw the look of disappointment on Rebus's face. "Doesn't help narrow things down, does it?"

"No."

"But this might." She slid a photocopied sheet towards him. It was a page from the *Scotsman*, dated February 12, 1877. There was a story, one long narrow column, concerning some artefacts found in a tunnel under Chambers Street. The artefacts—jugs, utensils, wine bottles—were thought to date back to the seventeenth century. Rebus looked up at her. She was nodding.

"The problem," she said, "is that from the evidence of this, not many people in Edinburgh *wouldn't* have known about those tunnels."

Rebus passed the information on to Professor Gates, then prepared an interim report, stating that as far as a solution was concerned, the Procurator-fiscal's office might as well forget it. A press release was issued, and barely taken up by the media.

The story, such as it was, had died.

Ten days later, Rebus received an invitation from Professor Gates to meet him at his office. The view from Gates's windows was of McEwan Hall and Teviot Row. Rebus, whose own meagre view from the CID suite at St. Leonard's was of the cop-shop car park, gazed out at another perfect late-spring day as he waited for Gates.

The pathologist bustled in with a grunt of apology and set his weight down on an antiquated swivel-chair, motioning for Rebus to be seated, too.

"I'm just grateful you lot haven't been keeping me too busy," Gates said. "Given me a chance to do some detective work of my own."

"Oh?"

Gates searched in his drawers for a folder, drew it out, and slapped it onto the desk. He tapped it as he spoke. "Poison and students, John. Students with a knowledge of poisons."

"Medical students?"

Gates nodded. "There were some great men in the medical faculty. Lister, Bell, and the rest. It was a time for experiments and research, great finds. Mind, they weren't always successful. The first guinea pigs to try laughing gas . . . there were near-fatalities." He stared at Rebus.

"Accidental poisoning?"

"Think for a moment. A group of students, doing their own work or just playing silly beggars. Testing cocktails of drugs. It happened then as now."

"What's in the folder?"

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Gates smiled at Rebus's impatience. "Let's say one of their number dies, or seems to be dead. Maybe they can't find a pulse. They see their whole careers crumbling, even before they've begun. So what do they do?"

"Hide the body," Rebus stated.

"Precisely."

"But what about the acid?" Rebus asked.

Gates opened the folder, slid out photocopies: old faculty records. "I was glad Miss Gilfillan came up with that news cutting. It narrowed my search. In eighteen seventy-seven, there were a dozen students training with particular emphasis on pathology. One of them was called John Candless. This is the faculty roll for eighteen seventy-seven." He pushed the sheet towards Rebus. "Three years later, the students graduated. But Candless wasn't amongst them." This second sheet he now pushed towards Rebus, who was nodding agreement.

"No one," the pathologist went on, "seems to know what happened to Candless. I've found what records I can, and it seems he just vanished into thin air as far as the university was concerned."

"Our skeleton?"

"Possibly."

Rebus studied the sheets. "We'll never prove it."

"No. But let's take the game a little further."

Rebus sat back in his chair. There was excitement in Gates's eyes.

"Another medical student," Gates continued. "He set up as a consulting pathologist around eighteen seventy-seven. By eighteen eighty, he was far from his alma mater, working on a whaling ship." He leaned forward in his chair. "The writing on the wall, John. That capital I, fainter than the other letters." He pushed the photograph towards Rebus. "What if it's not an I? What if it was meant to be the downstroke for the D, only the author didn't think it was deep enough, so tried again?"

Rebus blinked. "ACD?" He looked again at the graduation list. His finger tapped the name.

Gates was nodding, leaning back now, hands together as if in prayer.

"He covered up the mishap, hid the body, then returned to give it more of a burial. Guilty conscience, perhaps. Maybe he had his own way of dealing with that dark secret in later life. Maybe it never left him. . . ."

Rebus saw at last. The sheet fell from his hand. "ACD," he said. "Arthur Conan Doyle."

Gates applauded silently. "Elementary, isn't it?" he said with the merest ghost of a smile. ●

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REVENGE IS SWEET

by Celia Fremlin

It was a long letter: much longer than Gerald's usual hasty, loving scrawls—"Millions of kisses, darling," "In a mad rush, but lots and lots of love"—that sort of thing. This was a serious letter, and even as she picked up the airmail envelope from the mat and felt its thickness, Felicity was already filled with foreboding. And when she took in the mode of address—"My dear Felicity," instead of "My sweet, darlingest Flicky," she knew at once what the letter was going to say. It was going to tell her that their four-year love affair was at an end because Gerald had met someone else.

"Celia Fremlin is one of today's few really successful practitioners of the thriller short story; and her few volumes of collected stories contain, in fact, some of her finest work," said *Twentieth Century Crime Writers* in its entry on the British writer. Ms. Fremlin is the author of more than a dozen novels, one of which won the Edgar Allan Poe Award in 1960, but many readers find most memorable her concise and poignant short stories.

No need to read it, really. Why torture herself over the details when the main outline of the story was already so agonisingly clear?

A nonsense question. Of course she must know the details, every miserable one of them. The strange thing was that the more agonising any particular detail might be, the more desperate was her need to know it. Walking slowly into her sitting room, bright now with morning sunshine, she sat down by the window to read the four—no, five—closely written pages.

It was a careful letter, every sentence carefully contrived and its likely impact calculated. Felicity could picture Gerald, in his office, perhaps, or maybe in the university library, penning draft after draft, discarding the first one as too brusque, the second as too sentimental, the third as too apologetic. What fun the cleaners must have had going through his wastepaper basket next

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morning! She could almost hear their giggles across the three thousand intervening miles.

"I just hate to be writing this letter," he'd settled on, for his final draft. "I can't bear the thought that I may be causing you pain, my dear, but we have always made it a principle that we should be absolutely honest with each other—isn't that so? That's why I'm being absolutely honest with you now, as I'm sure you'd wish me to be. The truth is, my dear, that I've met someone else . . ."

Of course you have. Get on with it. What's she like? Tell, tell . . .

Greedy for further torment, Felicity turned the page and read on:

"Actually, Tricia's a bit like you, my dear, only blond, and with a less chiselled cast of feature. Almost snub-nosed, if I'm to be honest, and with round cheeks that . . ."

Here three words had been blacked out, but not so black that the eye of hatred couldn't pierce through to them. "That blush easily," he'd written, and had then realised that they might be hurtful to his former love. How right he was! What a perceptive, sensitive fellow!

Another page. At this point he seemed to have judged it appropriate to bring in a bit of sentiment, the soft stuff:

"I will never forget the wonderful times you and I have had together, Felicity dear. I shall always be grateful for them, and I do trust that we shall continue to be friends, close friends, always. Tricia wants it, too. She sends you her love—yes, she really does!—and is longing to meet you. I'm sure you will get on well together; you can't help liking her, she has such a sweet, generous nature . . ."

She's going to need it, too! Just let her wait. What else, Gerald dear? What else can you tell me to make me feel good?

"We shall be arriving in England on the twenty-third and will be going straight to my flat, where we plan to set up home together. We're even thinking of getting married; and perhaps it wouldn't be such a bad idea? That's the thing that you and I never managed to get around to, did we, Felicity dear? Your deep-seated need for personal freedom was something I had to respect . . ."

Bloody hell, it was *your* deep-seated need for personal freedom: I just went along with it, as you know damn well! Perhaps you're not in that university library at all, or even in your own flat? Perhaps you're in *her* cosy little bed-sit, with her hanging over your shoulder telling you exactly what to say to that wretched woman in London? Yes, I feel that this next thought is all hers:

"How right you were, my wise Felicity, to insist that we should each keep on our own flat, and not try to move in together. It would have been a disaster, and in our hearts we both knew it . . ."

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No, it was nothing to do with our hearts, mine *or* yours. It was because of your brand-new fitted carpets: You couldn't bear to leave them. Fair enough; I can quite understand. I even understood at the time; but don't start talking to me about hearts.

"I do hope this letter isn't going to upset you too much, my dear . . ."

I'm sure you hope so. It would make everything so much easier, wouldn't it, and not so much of a strain on Tricia's sweet and generous nature.

"And do remember, Felicity dear, that I *do* still love you, I always will, though not quite in *that* way anymore. After all, nothing lasts forever . . ."

Indeed it doesn't. Why don't you tell *her* so too, so that she doesn't get a nasty surprise one of these days? Yes, tell her right now, while she's kissing the bald bit on the top of your head and helping you to write this difficult letter to your discarded mistress.

Slowly, Felicity refolded the letter and slid it back into its envelope; cautiously, as if it was a letter bomb, to be handled with care. Leaning out into the June sunshine, Felicity contemplated the green canopy of leaves below. From up here, on the seventh floor, even the topmost branches seemed quite a long way down, moving ever so slightly in the almost windless air.

Why not go along with this "Let's all be friends" nonsense and invite the pair of them to Sunday lunch?

"Tricia, come and look at my view!" she could say, while Gerald was out of sight, doing something helpful in the kitchen; and while Tricia leaned out to admire the expanse of greenery—just a tiny push to send her hurtling to the pavement fifty feet below, her fashionably shod feet pointing upwards, waving wildly.

Ridiculous. Too crude. Too pointless, also; the dead don't even know they are being punished. And it was not, anyway, the sort of thing that a person like Felicity could possibly bring herself to do.

All right: So what sort of thing *could* a person like Felicity possibly bring herself to do?

Why not wreck their happy homecoming, which—they had so conveniently told her—was to be on the twenty-third? She still had the key to Gerald's flat, just as he still had the key to hers. Why not go along and wreck the place? With hammer, axe, and any other tool of destruction she could lay her hands on? Bash up those antique spindly chairs from Great Aunt Something-or-other? Splash ink and yellow paint all over his bloody fitted carpets? Smash every bulb in every one of his concealed-lighting effects? Pour cement down all the plug-holes and leave the taps running. Tear the microwave from its wires and chuck it across the room? And, best of all, switch off the freezer, tear the lid off it, and leave the rest of the task to the midsummer heatwave?

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"Welcome home, my darling," Gerald would be crooning to his beloved with her round cheeks that blushed so easily. "Welcome to our new home . . . !" and he would lift her lovingly over the threshold into an intolerable stink of decaying salmon, rotting poultry, and forty prime-quality pork chops crawling with maggots. . . .

A perfect revenge! So appropriate! So well-deserved. Their homecoming ruined: Their first romantic evening transformed into a nightmare!

For a minute or two—perhaps more—Felicity sat relishing the scenario she had conjured up; but it wasn't long before the objections to the plan began forcing themselves into her consciousness; the chief objection being—just as in the case of the murder plan—that she, Felicity, wasn't the sort of person who could do this sort of thing.

Foiled again. Back to the drawing board. And now, at last, the inspiration came to her. The perfect revenge! So neat, so easy, and, above all, everything that needed to be done was something that a person like herself *could* do.

Flowers were the first thing. She bought them in the market, fresh and dewy, on the morning of the twenty-third. Roses, lilies, sweet-scented carnations: enough to fill Gerald's whole flat with colour and sweetness. She arranged them in shining vases, silver some of them, and others crystal, and set them at strategic points in all his rooms, catching the light and reflected in the polished wooden surfaces she had worked so hard to bring to perfection. Here and there, loving little notes were attached: "Do you remember that night in Naples when you scattered lilies on our bed?" And more mundane notes, too, about the delicacies she had prepared for him, some all ready to eat, others waiting to be heated in the microwave. And finally, the best note of all was pinned to his pillowcase. You couldn't miss it when you turned the coverlet back.

"Darling, I can hardly wait," was all it said.

And then she went home. But first, she stood for a moment in the doorway of Gerald's flat, contemplating her handiwork and picturing its consequences. The sweet, generous nature would surely crack. Tricia's charmingly blushing cheeks would grow white with rage; the girlish voice would screech like a fishwife, calling her lover every name under the sun, of which "Liar!" and "Double-dealing bastard!" would be among the least offensive.

Wonderful!

It worked like a dream, exactly as she'd planned.

"Letter? What letter?" she inquired innocently when, some hours later, Gerald burst into her flat, incoherent with anxiety

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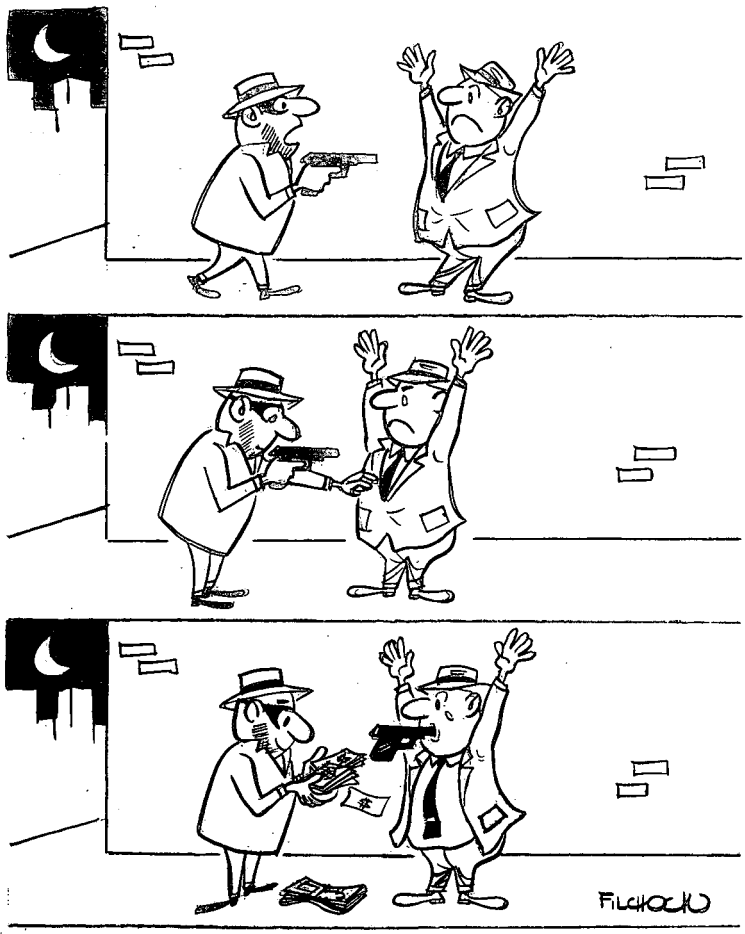
and panic, and barely able to frame intelligible questions.

"I never got any letter," she repeated. "I didn't expect one. I mean, darling, you never *do* write letters, do you? Only those nice, funny postcards."

Watching the immensity of the relief spreading across his face, she knew exactly what had happened. The terrible quarrel that she had planned for the two of them had indeed taken place, and Gerald, frightened and frantic, was fleeing back to his old love for solace.

And solace she would give him. Why not? She had won the victory and could afford to be generous. What use, in the long term, she was going to make of this victory, she had no idea; but then this has been a problem for conquerors the world over, from Alexander the Great onwards. And this particular moment, with Gerald's arms tightening around her, did not seem the right moment for solving such an age-old problem. ☺



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Art by Allen Davis

The Haunting of Driscoll Henley

by W. Edward Blain

After the Glasgow conference in July, when everyone else was flying back to the States, Driscoll Henley rented a cramped red Fiat for what was supposed to be a perfect vacation—four nights in the Scottish Highlands at a country-house hotel. The brochures had advertised gourmet food, charming isolation, and a resident ghost. But no one had warned Henley that beyond Loch Lomond the highway shrank to the width of a bowling lane, or that the journey he had estimated to take four hours would actually require seven. Thirty miles north of Fort Augustus, in the late afternoon, he finally spotted the signpost for The Laird's Lodge, drove a mile down a driveway through the woods, and eventually arrived at the whitewashed hotel, a former hunting lodge nestled between two of the hills surrounding Loch Knockie. However, though the setting was stunning, he was

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not entirely happy to be there. The record heat wave in Glasgow had traveled with Henley to the Highlands, so that instead of the mist and drizzle he'd anticipated, he emerged from the uncomfortable car into hot sunlight and glare. Furthermore, he had to park in a queue of five other automobiles facing the house as if they were loading onto a ferry, and he realized that he was going to have to move his vehicle whenever one of the other guests wanted to leave. Once registered, he discovered that the hotel, like his tiny red rental car, was *not* air-conditioned. And his "private" bathroom was across the hall from his bedroom.

In this new Driscoll Henley story, the private-school teacher is in Scotland, vacationing after attending an academic conference. Said author W. Edward Blain: "The fun I had in writing this story came from playing with Agatha Christie-era conventions while remembering that Christie's era is over." As in many mysteries from Christie's era, the setting here is a country house; though the characters have a very contemporary feel. ℙ

Worst of all, the ghost turned out to be American.

"Katherine Tranter was her name," said Mrs. Craig, who with her husband owned and operated the Lodge. "She was an American photographer compiling a book about Scottish eccentricity." Henley guessed that Mrs. Craig was a good fifteen years older than he was, at least fifty-five, but he wouldn't want to arm-wrestle her. She served him tea and oatcakes in the Map Room while the staff unpacked his car, and she told him that Katherine Tranter had lived here in the early 1930's as a guest of the Earl of Grampion, when the house was still his hunting lodge.

"Have you seen one of our picture postcards?" Mrs. Craig asked. "Katherine Tranter took the photograph before she became our ghost." Mrs. Craig handed Henley a postcard from a stack on the table beside her. The image revealed a sharp black-and-white view of the Lodge in profile. Its perspective was from a sufficient height and distance to include the narrow driveway emerging from the woods on the east side of the house and the lawn, more woods, and the loch on the west. Mrs. Craig tapped the center of the photograph with a finger. "The National Trust have asked us to maintain the exterior at precisely this appearance," she said, "though inside we've renovated considerably."

Henley sat in an overstuffed chair, admired the tartan rug under his feet, and vaguely listened to Mrs. Craig's stories while he considered whether to remain here or not. The Map Room was certainly attractive. It took its name from the gigantic map of the

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area that filled the entire south wall, but it might as well have been called the Album Room for all of the old photographs hanging on the other walls. The furniture, like that in every other room he'd seen, was comfortable, heavy, and expensive. In front of him, Henley could look to the west, through glassed French doors, onto the flawless green lawn. The darker green of treetops separated the grass from the bright blue water of the loch beyond—a magnificent view. But he didn't like detached bathrooms and narrow driveways and hot rooms with no screens on the windows. Still, he could not bear the thought of folding himself back into that car. The village of Whitebridge, four miles away, had no accommodations, and it was another hour north to Inverness. And Mrs. Craig's oatcakes were truly delectable. He sneaked himself a third one while she delivered a perhaps too comprehensive lecture about the ghost of Katherine Tranter.

"She never finished her book, of course. Vanished without a trace. Simply walked out these very doors one evening, strolled into the trees surrounding the loch, and never returned. We presume she drowned."

"When was that?" He swallowed more oatcake.

"Nineteen thirty-four. She disappeared on July twenty-eighth—Lady Grampion's birthday."

"So tomorrow is the anniversary?"

"Indeed it is, Mr. Henley. For over sixty years, stories of Lily Tranter have circulated round the loch. She's supposed to bring good luck if you see her."

"Lily?" he asked. "I thought you said her name was Katherine."

"Both," said Mrs. Craig. "They called her Lily because she loved to wear lilies in her hair. Do have another oatcake, Mr. Henley. There's no need to conceal one under your saucer."

Somehow everything seemed better after tea and oatcakes. As they did with all their guests, the Craigs placed his car keys in a cubbyhole at Reception, so that the responsibility of moving the automobiles in the narrow driveway would devolve on the staff, not on the paying clientele. His bed was comfortable, his bedroom spacious. Mrs. Craig certified that Henley held the only key to his bathroom, which was genuinely private even if it was across the hall from his bedroom. After tea he lay in the tub, then sketched in his journal the pristine lawn, the gardens, and the bright blue lake. During his second scotch he decided that this experience was even more professionally beneficial than the conference in Glasgow ("Shakespeare and the Supernatural: Witches, Ghosts, and Dreams"). He would send Suzanne McClain, his head of school—who was responsible for urging this excursion upon him—one of the postcards showing the Lodge in 1934. He would also send her an expense voucher in hopes that the school would pick up his tab.

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The next day—the day of the haunting—started out poorly at breakfast, when Emily, the chief housekeeper, told him that the kitchen was out of oatcakes.

"We should have some later in the morning," she said. She was young and pretty and skilled in handling disappointed tourists.

Henley had been anticipating the oatcakes ever since teatime yesterday. "I'll settle for fragments," he said. He pointed at the only other guest remaining in the dining room at this late hour of the morning, a man two tables away with a cast on his leg and a cane hooked to the arm of his chair. "Ask him if he has any leftovers." To Henley's embarrassment, the man with the cast overheard him. He held up his empty plate for Henley to see without removing his eyes from his newspaper.

Emily smoothed the white apron over her neat black dress, smiled, and shook her head. "That's Mr. McDaniel," she whispered. "Not even Mr. McDaniel could get an oatcake for breakfast this morning. Not even his wife, when she left in the car so early this morning." Emily leaned forward to pour him more decaf. "If you want to fetch your car keys from Reception, you could drive to the Widow Cuddy's house. It's only three miles by the road. She would give you some oatcakes."

"No," said Henley. "I'll just have to wait." He did not want to eat anything but Mrs. Craig's oatcakes now that he had tasted them. The Widow Cuddy—whoever that was—undoubtedly could grill a passable haddock and stir up a good pot of porridge, but Henley would not settle for anything less than the superlative cakes he had sampled yesterday.

There was nothing he could devise to console himself but to stroll next-door to the Map Room and sample the newspapers. Today Mrs. Craig was there again, her gardening gloves removed and resting on a tabletop as she arranged roses in a glass vase.

"Ah, Mr. Henley," she said when he entered the room, "will you be joining the other guests in Inverness? Yours is the only car left in the drive."

"Absolutely not," he said. He gathered that Mrs. Craig liked to banter. "I never want to get into that Fiat again."

"Then you must have a walk."

"It's hot out there," said Henley.

"But you're from Virginia. You're accustomed to heat," she said. Because she stood in front of the huge map that covered the entire south wall, she reminded him of an aging Scottish weather forecaster. In the center of the large-scale map, custom-made for Lord and Lady Grampion when they had owned the Lodge and three hundred and fifty thousand acres surrounding it, Loch Knockie sprawled like a misshapen blue rugby ball. "Here," said Mrs.

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Craig, pointing to a brown line around the blue water, "this path will take you eight miles around the perimeter."

"Eight miles!"

"Or as far as you like," she said. "It's a lovely day. Perhaps you'd prefer to climb some of our hills?"

Clusters of topographical circles indicated a series of hills ringing the loch at regular intervals, like spikes on a crown. Henley could look out the window and see them as well, identical elevations scalloped symmetrically around the lake. The Lodge itself, identified on the map like every other dwelling place in the vicinity with the emblem of a tiny house, sat between two of those hills. To Henley's dismay, the Craigs had highlighted their location on the map with one of their ubiquitous picture postcards, which they had tacked beneath their cartographic site with a red pushpin. Henley thought the postcard was slightly gauche, stuck as it was to the wall like a real-estate advertisement, but he could appreciate the Craigs' wanting to underscore their seclusion. It was a moderately undignified way of boasting that the nearest visible building was at least three miles away, at the edge of the village.

"I'm not much for hills," said Henley.

"Pity," said Mrs. Craig. "You can still visit the spot where Lady Grampion bagged her rabbit."

Wary of Mrs. Craig's anecdotes and yet impressed with her gift for piquing his curiosity, Henley had to ask why Lady Grampion's shooting of a rabbit was of historical significance.

"Because," said Mrs. Craig, "she was on the top of a hill, and the rabbit was one hundred and fifty yards away at the bottom. And she managed to kill it in only two shots."

Henley said a real marksman could have done it in one.

"But Lady Grampion had consumed three whiskey-and-sodas. Look here." On the map, just beneath the bottom edge of the intrusive postcard, sat the series of concentric topographical circles representing the very hill which the tipsy Lady Grampion had climbed. On the opposite side of this hill from the postcard, just east of the trees bordering the lake, was a small blue oval, indicating water. "It happened at this pond. If you were willing to climb, you could see it from her actual perch on the hilltop. But wait."

She led him to one of the old photographs on the other walls. It looked down from a steep angle on woods and a pond at twilight. At the edge of the water stood a happy woman in an elegant but soiled cocktail dress and muddy hunting boots. She held a dead rabbit in one mucky hand and her rifle in the other, and despite the dim light and her distance from the camera, her bright grin gleamed above the opaque waters of the lily pond. He noted the date at the bottom of the photograph: *July 28, 1934.*

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"Lady Grampion on her birthday," Henley said. "Did Lily Tranter take this picture?"

"Oh, no," said Mrs. Craig. "Lily Tranter disappeared earlier in the evening. But she did photograph the lady that morning. Perhaps you've seen a copy? It's rather famous."

She shifted his attention to a neighboring print, which revealed a smiling man and a smiling woman standing on a dirt road bordered by trees, each in matching trousers, jackets, and boots. The man had a cigar in his mouth and posed with one foot resting on the bumper of a white Rolls Royce. In front of him lay a dead stag, its antlers partially obscuring the stock of the rifle the man held in his right hand. The woman stood in precisely the same position, except that she had her own cigar, her own stag, her own gun, and her own white Rolls Royce. The man and the woman made almost perfect duplicates of each other.

"The laird and his lady," said Mrs. Craig. "Notice that the lady's deer had two more points than her husband's."

"But everything else, the cars, the clothes—"

"Identical," said Mrs. Craig. "It started as a game but became a legend. The Earl of Grampion and his lady would buy everything in pairs. And the legend attracted Katherine Tranter. Or Lily, as they called her."

"The American photographer researching a book about eccentrics."

"Yes," said Mrs. Craig. She pointed to a long shadow falling onto the road between the lord and the lady. "Here's the only surviving image we have of Lily Tranter. Supposedly she was a beautiful woman."

"Only her shadow? There isn't a picture of her face?"

Mrs. Craig shook her head. "There wasn't one to be found anywhere," she said. "After she departed, all photos of her were destroyed by the laird himself. Or some say by the lady."

"Why?"

"Because Lily Tranter had been the laird's mistress before she disappeared. She broke up their marriage."

Henley stared at the photograph. "She broke up this marriage?" he asked. "They look so happy."

"But they weren't," she said. "Not by this point." Mrs. Craig was genuinely mournful. "By the time of this photograph the laird and lady were already in the process of separating. In fact, they'd been on different hunts that day. When their parties met on the road, they thought it was too fine a coincidence to let slip. What you Americans call a photo opportunity. The cigar in the lady's mouth was a joke, of course. She was in high spirits for her birthday."

Henley examined the smiling couple with the oblong shadow between them. "Lady Grampion sounds like an astonishing woman," he said.

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Mrs. Craig nodded. "She and the laird had a brilliant relationship until the American woman came along to study it. And in recording it, she stole the heart of the laird. You might say she spoiled the soup by tasting it."

Henley read the identifying caption at the base of the second photograph: *July 28, 1934. Photograph by Katherine Tranter.*

"She had a good eye," he said. "And later that day—"

"She disappeared. This was the last photo Miss Tranter ever took," said Mrs. Craig. "On that very night the laird served cocktails to his guests on the lawn. At dusk, Miss Tranter fancied a walk to the loch in her white dress, and they never saw her again."

"How did they get this picture, then?"

"They found the film later with the rest of her belongings, still in her room here in the Lodge."

Henley was immediately suspicious. "Lady Grampion wouldn't have needed all evening to hunt a rabbit," he said. "She could have ambushed Lily Tranter earlier, couldn't she? And hidden her body anywhere around the loch? She was obviously a good shot."

Mrs. Craig smiled. "Believe me, Mr. Henley, you're not the first person to ask such questions. Throughout that day and evening the lady was occupied with her own guests, apart from the laird's. They could vouch for her whereabouts every moment."

Henley was fascinated. "You mean they had two separate guest lists—"

"Separate guests, separate parties, separate everything. They'd always done so, even when the marriage was a happy one. The laird and the lady were truly unconventional, Mr. Henley. Lily Tranter had not chosen to study them simply because of their wealth and extensive properties." She returned to arranging her roses. "All the land was broken into parcels and sold years ago, of course. But we still try to provide our guests with a taste of elegance. I trust your breakfast was satisfactory?"

"Perfect," he said, "except there were no oatcakes."

"None?" she said. "I shall do something about that immediately."

She took the flowers with her and left Henley alone in the sunny room. Despite his long sleep of the night before, Henley dozed over his newspaper before he finally roused himself for that walk around the loch. The reception area was unoccupied when he left the Map Room, and the whole house seemed deserted. But upstairs Henley discovered a young woman with red hair standing just inside the door to his private bathroom, a door he was certain he had locked. She wore a white apron and, strangely enough, galoshes. Though she was not an employee he had seen before, she clearly knew who he was, since she stepped forward and handed him, to his delight, one fresh oatcake wrapped in cellophane.

"Thank you," said Henley. "Please tell Mrs. Craig—"

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She was already on her way down the hall, galoshes faintly flapping, then she turned to descend the stairs. For such a small hotel—only twelve guest rooms—the Lodge had a gratifyingly large staff. He stuck the oatcake into the pocket of his trousers, grabbed his journal, used his two keys to lock both his bedroom and his bathroom, and exited the building through the French doors in the Map Room. As he crossed the lawn toward the tree line, his journal in hand, he encountered a young man who served as one of Emily's assistants in Housekeeping and who now carried a basket of weeds toward the house.

"Hello, Stewart," said Henley, pleased with himself for recalling the name, and then suddenly worried that he'd been rude in using such a familiar form of address.

"Mind the foliage, Mr. Henley," said Stewart, who seemed somewhat annoyed that Henley was tramping across the lawn. He was possibly twenty-five years old but looked seventeen. "The path is a bit overgrown. You'll see your way on the other side of the fence." And, sure enough, once he entered the tree line, Henley came to a wooden fence with a stile and a rickety, rotting sign reading "The Laird's Lodge" nailed to the nearest post. What had appeared to be a thin verge of green from the house was actually a band of forest fifty yards wide bordering the loch. There was a faint trail through the woods. Henley turned south and began to pick his way through the bracken.

Aggressive black flies were on him immediately, as if he had crossed a boundary and deserved punishment for trespassing. He found that he could keep the flies away only by batting at them constantly with his journal. As an added unpleasantness, he could see neither the loch nor the landscape because the trees were so thick on both sides of the trail. After nearly half an hour of combat he came to a faint fork leading to the left up an elevation. Gratefully he took it, and despite the steepness of the climb, he was immediately pleased with how much faster he could move now that he was walking up a strip of rock bisecting the undergrowth. Soon he could see the white lodge on his left as he climbed out of the tree line and back into the bright sunlight, and he reached the summit in only a few minutes.

He was appalled that after so much struggling he had made so little progress from his starting point. The house was perhaps two hundred yards away at most. He noted his red Fiat alone in the driveway and felt a slight pang of embarrassment not to be driving something fancier. Would the employees at the Lodge give him poorer service because of the modesty of his vehicle? Had they snickered this morning as they'd moved his car to make way for the grander models?

He turned to look behind him to the south, and, as expected, at

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the base of this hill lay the small pond he had seen on the map this morning. It was perhaps the size of a basketball court, with reeds and lily pads occupying half its surface. This was the view Mrs. Craig had promised him, the spot where Lady Grampion required a mere two shots to slaughter an innocent rabbit as it emerged from the woods far below. But today there was no quarry in sight. In the spot where the lady had once stood to pose for a photograph, a blue car sat parked by the reeds. Nearby, a naked woman lay on a white towel, with a white pile of clothes beside her. All that she wore was a pair of wraparound sunglasses. As Henley stared, she mortified him by waving, casually, unconcerned about his viewing her from one hundred and fifty yards away.

She was beautiful.

Of course, Henley was too sophisticated to stare for long. Public nudity was, he reminded himself, common in European countries. There was nothing to be excited about. In a grand act of deliberate nonchalance, he opened his journal, turned his back on the naked sunbather, and began to study the white lodge on the other side of the hill. He could always sneak another peek at the woman by swiveling one hundred and eighty degrees.

Henley was not a confident artist. As he considered the scene in front of him, he wasn't sure of what to draw first: his car in the drive? the conical hill on the north side of the house? the lawn and the tree line? He closed his eyes and tried to visualize the crucial lines he'd have to render. The sun was hot on his face. When he looked at the house again, he saw a woman unfamiliar to him emerge from the French doors and walk toward the loch. She wore a yellow scarf on her head and a white dress, and even then the scarf struck Henley as a strange garment for such a hot day. At that distance and angle it would have been hard enough to see her face anyway, but the scarf concealed her visage entirely. The woman turned her back to Henley and shook her fist at the Lodge as if she were angry at it, and then she resumed her purposeful striding toward the trees and the water. At that moment Henley saw a window on the second floor slowly furl outward as someone wound it open. Although the glare on the glass was blinding, he could see the barrel of a rifle emerge from the window and steady itself in direct aim at the back of the departing woman. Then the gun fired.

The woman dropped in a heap on the grass. The rifle barrel withdrew. The window slowly swung closed again.

"Hey," said Henley. Flustered, he stood, spun around, and waved at the naked woman sunning by the pond below him. "Somebody has been shot," he shouted down the hill. The woman looked up, held her hand behind one ear to indicate failure to hear, and then resumed her sunbathing. Henley swiveled back to look at the house. Nothing had changed. The windows in the

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southwest corner room, from which the shot was fired, were covered by white curtains. There were no signs of life at the house. He turned again and waved his arms to the sunbather on the other side of the hill. This time she ignored him. He instinctively started down the hillside toward her anyway, but then he stopped. The trail was so badly maintained here as to be nonexistent. The bracken hid holes, rocks, and roots, and if he rushed, he was likely to twist an ankle or break a leg. Besides, once he began to approach the sunbather, she might misunderstand his motives and consider him a threat, whereupon she would be up and gone before he could reach her. Immediately he reversed course and started down the opposite side of the hill toward the house and the body on the lawn. Yet here the trail was in an equivalent state of neglect. He would actually save time by going back the way he had come, so he took off down the side of the hill toward the woods and the lake. All this time he continued to watch the house, surprised that there was no tumult. Why weren't Mr. and Mrs. Craig out on the lawn? Why wasn't the staff? With horror, Henley realized that they might all be dead already. What he'd seen could have been the last victim of a mass murder. And yet the woman had not emerged from the house like someone fleeing a killer. She'd been striding, yes, moving quickly and decisively, but she'd seemed more defiant and angry than frightened. Just before he reached the tree line again, he looked at the house in the distance. The body lay crumpled on the lawn. The white house sat still as a mausoleum.

This time the flies didn't matter. He rushed along the shady path, exasperated by how long it took to maneuver through the young shrubs in his way. At last he reached the signposted stile, crossed it, and emerged from the woods. He expected to find a crowd of people and police inspecting a body. Instead, all he saw was the lodge on an ordinary day of business. The man he'd seen at breakfast this morning reclined in a chaise longue in the center of the lawn with his cane propped against the cast on his extended right leg. Beside him, Stewart, the housekeeper's assistant, offered a plate of oatcakes.

"What's happened?" said Henley. "Where's the body? Are the police on the way?"

The two men looked at one another and then cautiously back at Henley.

"Mr. Henley?" said Stewart.

Henley reported the shooting and pointed to the window from which the rifle had emerged.

The man with the cast on his leg extended a hand for Henley to shake. "Buddy McDaniel from Raleigh, North Carolina," he said. "Now which window was it?"

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Henley introduced himself, helped McDaniel up, and pointed toward the house.

"That's my room," said McDaniel. "That's impossible. I've been here all morning."

Stewart asked him to describe the victim.

"She had on a white dress. And a yellow scarf."

Stewart said he'd seen no one in such an outfit.

"Please," said Henley, "can't we at least take a look in that bedroom?"

With Stewart hurrying before them, Henley escorted the excruciatingly slow Buddy McDaniel to the house. "Fell off the curb at Heathrow," he said. "Stupidest thing I've ever done. Skeeter like to kill me."

"Skeeter?"

"My wife. You might have heard her leaving this morning for Inverness? She's gotten right tired of looking after me on this trip."

They took a small elevator beside the abandoned reception desk in the foyer and rode up one floor. Buddy McDaniel preceded Henley down the hall to the southern-most room and unlocked the door.

"The gun came out that window," said Henley, pointing to the corner. He walked across the room to the latch and tried to open it. It was stuck.

"We can't work it either," said McDaniel. "I think it's painted shut."

Stewart arrived with Emily, the chief housekeeper, and stood with her in the doorway. "That window won't open in this weather," he said. "The wood swells, you see."

Then Mr. and Mrs. Craig pushed their way into the room. "They shot the woman where?" asked Mr. Craig. He was perhaps sixty years old and wore a wool tie and sports coat. He was as tall as Henley. "Here? On our lawn? When?"

"More than half an hour ago," said Henley. "The gun was in this window"—he tried to turn the handle again, and once more he failed—"but I couldn't see the person holding it because of the glare and the curtains." Then he stopped, baffled. The windows in this room had no curtains, but a set of interior wooden shutters.

"How far along the path did you go?" asked Mr. Craig. "You're sure it was this house?"

"Of course it was this house," said Henley. "There's no other house it could be. I barely got started on my walk before the flies drove me up that hill. I sat at the top, and I could recognize everything on the property, including my red Fiat in the driveway."

"Your car," said Mr. Craig. "Did you see any other vehicles?"

"None," said Henley. "Mine was the only one. Just as it is now."

"Had you seen this woman before?" asked Mrs. Craig.

"I don't think so," said Henley. "The scarf on her head made it

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hard to see." Mrs. Craig stared thoughtfully at her husband, who kept his eyes on the window.

"A scarf," said Mr. Craig.

"And his car was the only one in the drive," said Mrs. Craig.

"I know," said her husband. "I can't sort it out."

"What difference does it make where my car was?" asked Henley. "What about the weapon? Do you keep firearms here?"

"None," said Mr. Craig.

"But it's a hunting lodge," said Henley.

"Aye," said Mr. Craig. "Three score years ago it was a hunting lodge, when the Earl of Grampion owned the place. We're an inn now, Mr. Henley. If our friends are kind enough to invite us to go hunting now, they lend us the weapons."

Henley turned to Buddy McDaniel. "What about you and your wife? Did you bring a rifle here?"

"Are you kidding?" said McDaniel. "You think we want to mess with all these British gun-control laws?"

Emily spoke up from her position next to Stewart in the doorway. "Mr. Henley," she said, "excuse me, but you say you climbed the southern hill? And you could see the house and your car?"

"Yes, clearly."

"And down the opposite side of the hill, Mr. Henley. Behind you. What could you see in that direction?"

"Aye," said Mr. Craig. "A fine question."

He wondered why they cared, but he answered. "I saw a naked woman. She was sunbathing." It sounded ridiculous. He expected mockery from his listeners, but they found that part of the story perfectly plausible.

"The Widow Cuddy is becoming rather bold, isn't she?" said Stewart.

"Brazen," said Mrs. Craig. She looked at her husband, who looked right back.

Buddy McDaniel leaned on his cane. "Heck, Driscoll. You see a naked woman on one side of the hill and a lady get shot on the other. What I want to know is this: When you were growing up, did you get along all right with your momma?" Henley could imagine the entire affair as one of the topics under discussion at the conference last week in Glasgow: "Thanatos and Eros in Middle-aged Male Hallucinations."

"Nobody is missing?" he asked. "It could have been somebody on the staff. Or a stray visitor."

Mr. Craig maintained his patience. "Each employee is alive and well," he said. "I've just returned from the village with four cases of champagne, and every member of the staff helped me unload it." The others nodded in confirmation as he continued. "Our other guests are away for the day, but we know what their plans were. And it

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would be highly unlikely for a stranger to enter the house unobserved. You yourself testify to seeing no other car but your own."

"But people on the staff drive," said Henley. "Where do they park? Where do you park your own car?"

"Behind the old stables. It's a ten-minute walk. It would be impossible for someone to carry a gun from there, enter the house, and fire it without being noticed. Not to mention concealing a dead body on the lawn."

"It's a very hot day, Mr. Henley," said his wife. "And you were a long way off."

They were being so infuriatingly nice. "We've been here these seventeen years and haven't experienced any crime worse than the odd missing towel," said Mr. Craig. "I saw no one on the road when I returned with the champagne a few minutes ago. We have no dead woman on the lawn. No one has heard any gunfire. It is a warm day, Mr. Henley. Perhaps your imagination got the best of you in the Highland air."

He escorted Henley downstairs to the Map Room, where Emily brought him a plate of oatcakes and a pot of tea. Buddy McDaniel limped in and joined them.

"When I was a little boy," said McDaniel, "my daddy took me to see Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest,* and I can remember a scene where Doris Day wrote a message inside a matchbook cover and threw it down onto the sofa for Cary Grant to read. Now imagine how surprised I was two years ago when Skeeter rented that movie and it turned out that Doris Day wasn't even in it. The star was Eva Marie Saint. And Cary Grant was the one who wrote the message, not the other way around. You understand? I remember seeing right vividly something that never happened."

"Today was real," said Henley. He walked to the large map on the wall and pointed to the postcard tacked to the surface. "It looked just like this," he said, "except that my car was there, too." But even as he spoke, he began to doubt himself. The view of the Lodge on the postcard was exactly what he had seen this morning from the hilltop, including white curtains at every upstairs window. But there were no such curtains in the Lodge today. Had his mind somehow conflated a 1934 image of the house with a modern one?

Emily lingered in the doorway. "Excuse me, Mr. Henley?" she asked. "When you saw the woman sunbathing? Where was she? On the lawn?"

"On the grass, yes," said Henley. "Right beside the lily pond."

"Pond?"

"The little lake. Whatever you call it in your country." He pointed to the small blue oval on the opposite side of the hill from the postcard. "The place where Lady Grampion shot her rabbit."

"Aye," said Emily. Her voice was unsteady. Her face had turned

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so red that she might have been sunbathing herself. She left them abruptly.

Henley turned to Buddy McDaniel. "What got her so upset?" he asked.

McDaniel talked with his mouth full of oatcake. "You spooked her. Remember, they do believe in ghosts around here." He nodded toward a chair. "Sit down and get acquainted. Did they say you went to some drama thing in Glasgow?"

"Just finished," said Henley. McDaniel was the kind of American tourist that made Henley wish for required etiquette lessons with every passport. "How about you?" he forced himself to ask. "Vacation?"

Buddy McDaniel nodded. "A little pleasure, a little business. Today's our last day in the Highlands. Skeeter wanted to be first in line at the woolen stores when they opened this morning. I told her it wasn't like Inverness was going to run out of sweaters. That'd be like us McDaniels running out of hamburger buns."

It was then that Henley realized who his companion was. "You run McDaniel Bread Company?"

"That's us."

Henley was astonished. Surely everyone in the States ate something baked by McDaniel Bread Company: doughnuts, buns, rolls, loaves, breadsticks, cookies. Buddy McDaniel confided that his company was about to become even bigger. "The minute I tasted these oatcakes," he said, "I knew we could never imitate them. So we're buying them. When Skeeter gets back from Inverness, we'll sign the contract to be the sole manufacturer and distributor of Mrs. Craig's Oatcakes. That's the name we'll use to market them, you see. And we'll have a drawing of Mrs. Craig herself on the box."

Now Henley understood why Mr. Craig had gone to the village for champagne.

Stewart appeared in the doorway. "Telephone message, Mr. McDaniel. Mrs. Norwood rang from Inverness to say that your wife missed their luncheon engagement. She said she hasn't seen or heard from Mrs. McDaniel all day."

Buddy McDaniel waved the news away as if it were a bad odor. "Skeeter's been kind of cranky lately. She's apt to change her mind on the spur of the moment."

Henley tried not to look interested.

"May I offer you gentlemen some late lunch?" Stewart asked. "All I can offer is sandwiches, I'm afraid. When the weather grows this hot, Lindsay won't cook anything between breakfast and tea."

Henley requested a tomato sandwich brought to his bedroom. He could eat it while taking a bath, which, he realized with some embarrassment, he needed. Instead of walking upstairs, however, he exited through the French doors and once more inspected the

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lawn. This time he searched beneath the chaise longue where Buddy McDaniel had sat. No signs of violence at all. Nothing to indicate that a body was dragged off and hidden. He circled the house and entered from the driveway side, noting on his way across the empty foyer that McDaniel had disappeared from the Map Room. Upstairs he unlocked the door to his bathroom and started the bath water. Then he unlocked and entered his bedroom, where he stood by a window and considered the possibilities. He'd seen a woman shot today, and now Mrs. McDaniel was apparently missing. But how could she have been the victim of the crime he had witnessed this morning? How could she have returned to the Lodge without her car or without being seen by anyone? Moreover, why would anyone want to kill Mrs. McDaniel? Given that she and her husband were about to settle a small fortune on the Craigs for the rights to their oatcakes, anyone associated with the Lodge should want to keep her alive.

He emptied his pockets onto the bureau but paused when it was time to set down his keys. A bathroom key and a bedroom key. So extravagant to have two keys to two rooms for one person. Two keys. Two rooms. Pairs. Twins. There was one more explanation that he hadn't yet considered. "I'm so stupid," he said aloud. He was so excited that he forgot about the water running in the bathroom across the hall.

He hurried back downstairs to the unoccupied Map Room. The postcard tacked to the map waited for him on the south wall. He crossed immediately to the red pushpin and pulled the card free. It was just as he'd suspected.

The postcard had concealed the presence of another hill — and a second house.

"The Lady's Lodge," said the printed caption on the map, neatly corrected with the penciled words "Cuddy House." Of course. They bought everything in pairs: identical cars, identical clothes — why not identical hunting lodges? The lord and lady had been in the process of separating in 1934. But their lodges had been right next door to one another, separated only by one of the hills circling the loch—close enough for their hunting parties to meet on the road for a chance photograph. Emily had told him this morning that it was three miles by the road to the Widow Cuddy's house: one mile down the drive, one mile down the highway, and another mile down the widow's driveway. By the footpath, of course, her home was much closer.

Now Henley understood why Emily had asked him so pointedly about what he'd observed on the opposite side of the hill from the shooting. She had realized that, if he had been standing on the hill between the Laird's Lodge and the Widow Cuddy's, then he would have seen both houses from the summit. But when he'd

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reported viewing a house to the north and a lily pond to the south, Emily had deduced that he had witnessed a murder at the home next door. No wonder his trek through the woods had seemed to take so long this morning. While he'd been picking his route through the bracken, the trees had obscured an entire hill and another house from his view, just as the postcard had on the map. Now he understood why the postcard was there: It helped to create a sense of isolation that wasn't entirely accurate.

When he turned away from the map, he nearly collided with Buddy McDaniel. "Driscoll," said McDaniel, "we've got a problem upstairs—"

Screams from the kitchen overlapped with pandemonium in the foyer. Henley entered the reception area in time to see Mr. Craig telling an elderly woman to stop shrieking. Stewart entered from the dining room with Henley's sandwich on a tray.

"Water!" said the elderly woman, who turned out to be Lindsay, the cook. "Water in the ceiling!"

"My bathtub," said Henley. He took the stairs, all the others except Buddy McDaniel following. The wet floral carpet all along the upstairs hallway squished as the group rushed to Henley's bathroom, where Mrs. Craig was already fumbling with her keys to unlock the door.

"It shouldn't be locked," said Henley.

"But it is," she said in polite irritation. She opened the bathroom door.

The bathtub was indeed overflowing. It had spilled over particularly swiftly because the body of Emily, still in her black dress and housekeeper's cap, floated facedown in the water. After they shut off the taps and pulled the body free, they confirmed that she was dead. In the bottom of the tub was a set of keys. Mr. Craig pulled up his sleeve and fished them out.

"My car keys," said Driscoll Henley.

"Very odd," said Mr. Craig.

"Who would do such a thing?" asked Stewart.

Mrs. Craig looked at Henley strangely. They all did.

"Wait a minute," said Henley. "Just because she ended up in my bathroom—"

"With the door locked."

"And you having the only key."

"No," said Henley. "All the staff would have a key. Or a guest could use Emily's own passkey to lock the door from the outside." He pointed to the soggy body on the tile floor. "She was drowned because she'd figured out who killed Mrs. McDaniel."

"What?" said Buddy McDaniel, his cane trembling as he approached from the elevator.

"Your wife never made it to Inverness. No one has seen her

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since her early departure this morning."

"Skeeter's got a mind of her own," said McDaniel. "She's often one to change her plans at the last minute."

"Why are you so unconcerned?" asked Henley. "Aren't you listening? There's another house that looks just like this one. It's the home of the Widow Cuddy, and it's just on the other side of the hill. That's where I saw the woman killed."

"Of course there's another house," said Mr. Craig. "I asked you this morning if you were sure you had the right one. But you were so certain. And there was your car—"

"Yes," said Henley. "Somebody must have taken my car keys from Reception and driven to the widow's."

"Isn't it odd," said Mrs. Craig, "that your story has changed so radically at the moment we've discovered Emily's body?"

Henley felt their suspicions returning.

"We need to phone the Widow Cuddy," said Mr. Craig.

"We need to go over there," said McDaniel.

"We need to determine why Mr. Henley's car keys are in Emily's possession," said Mrs. Craig. "Mr. Henley claims that someone drove his car next door. But has anyone actually seen his car moving today?"

They shook their heads. "But nobody watches the driveway all day long," said Henley. "Maybe Emily drove it herself."

"Nay," said Mr. Craig. "If Emily had wanted to drive somewhere, she would have walked to the staff car park and taken her own vehicle, wouldn't she? A better guess is that she'd tumbled onto some damaging information and had come up here to discuss it with Mr. Henley. Information related somehow to his automobile."

They looked at Henley again, now with more hostility.

"Let's go check my car then," said Henley. They traipsed downstairs. Mr. Craig kept a grip on Henley's keys and opened the driver's door himself. Nothing in the interior was out of the ordinary. Henley couldn't remember his mileage from yesterday and, hence, couldn't prove whether the car had traveled a few more miles today or not.

"There's nothing helpful here," said Henley.

"What about the boot?" asked Mr. Craig.

"Go ahead," said Henley. "It's empty." But he was wrong. When Mr. Craig unlocked the trunk and lifted the door, they beheld the bloodstained body of a woman, dead, still wearing her white dress. Her yellow scarf had fallen around her neck to reveal thin gray hair.

"The Widow Cuddy," said Stewart. "I've never seen her without her wig before."

"That's the person I saw get shot," said Henley.

"So she couldn't have been sunbathing," said Mr. Craig. He looked at the corpse and then moved his eyes toward Henley. "Or

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did you invent the sunbather to give yourself an alibi? You used one of Mrs. Cuddy's own guns to kill her, didn't you? Get some rope, Stewart. We'll bind him until the constable can come."

Henley was appalled at such a leap in logic. "Hold on," he said. "How could I possibly—"

"All the shouting, Mr. Henley. All the pretense of seeing a murder when you were actually committing it yourself."

"Hold on," said Henley. "This makes no sense. Why would I kill a total stranger and then advertise the fact?"

"That's what Emily must have wondered," said Mr. Craig.

Stewart returned from the house. "The constable is on his way," he said. He carried some clothesline.

"Restrain him," said Mr. Craig.

"No," said Henley. He stepped away. The crowd did not pursue. One advantage of having them think of him as a murderer was that they would be wary of getting too close.

"You," said Henley to Buddy McDaniel. "Clumping around here with that cane. The old fake-cast routine. That's the oldest trick in the book."

McDaniel shook his head. "Check with those nice folks at the National Health in Chiswick," he said. "They'll tell you how fake—" He paused as a blue BMW came down the driveway and stopped behind the Fiat. A blond woman wearing wraparound sunglasses emerged.

Henley recognized her immediately. "There's the sunbather," he said.

The woman pulled off her glasses and grinned. "Guilty," she said. "Hi, Buddy."

"Skeeter, honey," said McDaniel, "I had a terrible feeling about you when they started talking about a naked lady sunbathing. Why didn't you go to Inverness? Some folks were expecting you."

She nodded. "I know," she said. "But I just couldn't deal with people today, you know? I heard about this little lily pond, and I was just so tired of being around other Americans. Not to mention the driving. I just wanted some privacy." Then she took a step closer, saw the Widow Cuddy in Henley's car, and stopped talking.

"All right, Mr. Henley," said Mr. Craig. "You have a witness to corroborate your story about climbing the hill at the widow's house. But how can you explain the presence of a dead woman in your car?"

Henley had no idea. He swatted at a fly on his trousers, missed, and heard a crunch as his hand collided with the contents of his right-hand pocket. He reached inside the pocket to retrieve whatever he'd crushed and found the single oatcake that his lovely visitor in the galoshes had given him this morning. The cellophane-wrapped wafer was now in pieces.

At once he understood.

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"When the weather is this hot," he said, "Lindsay refuses to heat up the stove."

They stared at him as if he were truly deranged.

"So if there's no baking at the lodge after breakfast, how did we come into such a bountiful supply of oatcakes today?" he asked. "There weren't any this morning, but we have plenty now."

Stewart said that the oatcakes had been waiting in a box at the reception desk. "That's where they are every morning," he said. "Today the delivery was just a bit late."

"Delivered by whom?" said Henley. "By the Widow Cuddy? She was the one who actually baked them, wasn't she?"

"That's no secret," said Mr. Craig. "She's catered for us for years."

"Emily tried to tell me this morning at breakfast," said Henley. "She said I could get some oatcakes directly from the Widow Cuddy. I just never realized that she meant the actual oatcakes served here at the lodge."

Skeeter McDaniel nodded. "Emily told me the same thing when I was about to leave for Inverness. So I went over there. I hated to be mean, but business is business."

"What did you say to the Widow Cuddy?" asked Henley, already guessing the answer.

"I said I was sorry and all, but that after Buddy and I signed our contract with the Craigs, the widow lady wasn't going to be able to make Mrs. Craig's oatcake recipe without our permission, on account of how we'd have the rights to it. She got real quiet and thoughtful when I told her. But she still gave me directions for how to drive to her lily pond. She was real sweet."

Lindsay, the cook, moaned in fury. "You were going to sell the recipe for the oatcakes to the Americans?" she said to the Craigs.

Mr. Craig told her to mind her position.

Henley faced the proprietor. "It's clear what happened," he said. "The Widow Cuddy wasn't merely your caterer. It was her recipe you were selling. You were stealing her copyright and royalties."

His wife answered. "No," she said. "It's my recipe. I keep it in the office, under lock and key."

"Did you take it from her this morning? Or did you persuade her to give it to you earlier, when she had no reason to suspect your motives?"

She would not reply.

Henley held out the crushed oatcake in his hand. "Can you name the ingredients in my hand right now?" he asked. "Can you tell me how long this oatcake has to cook, and at what temperature?"

"You prove nothing," said Mrs. Craig. "I can still own the recipe without memorizing it."

"What happened this morning after breakfast?" Henley asked her. "You telephoned the Widow Cuddy to ask her why she hadn't

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delivered today's oatcakes, right? You were embarrassed that there hadn't been any available for the morning meal. And she told you that she wasn't delivering anything except a lawsuit."

"Nonsense," said Mrs. Craig. "She simply told me that she was delayed because her car was under repair in the village. Check with the garage if you don't believe me."

That explained why Henley had seen only his own car in the widow's driveway. "So how did she end up in my trunk with a bullet in her back?" He turned to her husband. "You were gone a long time on your trip to the village this morning."

"See here," said Mr. Craig. "I was searching for champagne. There are dozens of witnesses."

"Of course," said Henley. "And Buddy McDaniel can't drive because of the cast on his leg. So there was only one person here who didn't have a car. Only one person desperate enough to borrow the keys to my rental car for transportation to the widow's. There was just too much money at stake."

Mr. Craig stared down at his wife, who kept her eyes directly on Henley.

"Mrs. Craig," said Henley, "you took my car when the staff was busy, drove to the Widow Cuddy's home, shot her with her own gun in her own backyard, and then transported her back here."

Mrs. Craig laughed out loud. "Why should I bring back incriminating evidence with me? Why should I return to the Lodge with the corpse? That's madness, Mr. Henley. A murderer would try to avoid discovery, not encourage it."

"Exactly," said Henley. "The chance for discovery was greater if you left the body lying on her lawn. A mechanic from the village would be bringing her repaired car back, wouldn't he? Or a friend would drop by. You weren't sure. All you knew was that you had to delay the discovery of the body as long as possible. You wanted those signatures on the contract and the McDaniels gone. You knew that I wasn't using my car today. Tonight you could transfer the remains from my trunk to some secluded spot around the loch. And there would never be a trace of the Widow Cuddy again. No one would be able to pinpoint exactly when she had disappeared. She could be another Lily Tranter, just vanishing."

"Ingenious," said Mrs. Craig. Her face was very bright in the hot sun. "But you have no proof."

"No?" said Henley. "You were the first one to arrive at my flooding bathroom just now. How was that? You weren't on your way into the room, but on your way out of it, weren't you?"

"Guesswork, Mr. Henley. You're groping."

Henley did not falter. "Then how did these oatcakes get here today, Mrs. Craig? The Widow Cuddy couldn't deliver them. She had no car. None of your employees was sent to fetch them, and

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your husband was in the village looking for champagne. Lindsay didn't bake them. Who else but you would care about having a supply of oatcakes around for the day of the great contract signing? Anybody might have stuffed the widow's body into my car in an attempt to conceal it, but only you would have brought the baked goods back here, too. You had no idea that there had been an eyewitness to the murder. You figured you were safe enough, that no one would associate the daily arrival of the oatcakes with the mysterious disappearance of the widow. You spied fresh oatcakes in her kitchen after you cleaned the gun, and you just couldn't leave them. They really are irresistible, aren't they?"

Nobody spoke. Mr. Craig kept his eyes steadily on his wife. "I always advised you to pay her for the recipe," he said finally.

All at once Mrs. Craig started to cry. "It wasn't simply the money," she said. "I couldn't bear the thought of seeing her likeness instead of mine on the tins."

After the constables had taken Mrs. Craig away, Henley sat in the Map Room and stared at the loch. Stewart approached with a tray and a glass. "Mr. Henley," he said gently, "Mr. Craig asked me to give you a drink of whiskey. No charge. He's dreadfully upset."

"It's not poisoned, is it?"

Stewart shook his head. "Mr. Craig bears you no ill will. He's quite sorry that money and fame turned Mrs. Craig's head for the moment. He had no part in his wife's schemes. He apologizes for allowing himself to accuse you rather than to consider the more painful explanation. And he's dreadfully sorry that Emily confronted his wife directly instead of going to him."

Henley took a sip of the scotch. It was smooth and peaty. "You know, Stewart," he said, "I'd like to thank the woman on the staff who gave me that oatcake this morning. If I hadn't found it in my pocket at the moment when I did, I'm not sure I would have figured things out."

"Would that be Lindsay, Mr. Henley?"

"The cook? No, I know her." They went through the entire list. "This was a red-haired woman," said Henley.

"There's no red-haired woman on our staff, Mr. Henley."

"Very pretty. Very nice smile. And I thought it was strange, since she had on galoshes."

Stewart studied him to see if Henley were joking. "Odd," he said. From a bookshelf he fetched the leather-bound history of the Lodge and found the page he sought. "Here," he said. "Katherine Tranter had red hair. Did you know that before?" Henley uneasily shook his head. "The story," said Stewart, reading, "is that she put on some galoshes before she left the laird's cocktail party for her walk around the loch."

It was impossible. Henley didn't believe in ghosts. Surely the

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woman who'd given him the oatcake must have been some passing visitor to the kitchen, a friend of the staff. And then the full significance of the galoshes hit him. "Oh no," he said. "Galoshes? To protect her feet from the mud?" He could see the entire scene. Why else would Katherine Tranter wear galoshes but to gather her favorite flowers from the lily pond south of the lady's hunting lodge?

He stood up and walked to the wall holding the photograph of Lady Grampion and the celebrated rabbit she killed on her birthday. "Stewart," he asked, "who took this picture?"

"No one knows, Mr. Henley. It was one of the lady's guests."

"But it wasn't somebody who had accompanied her up the hill while she took aim at the rabbit, was it? Companions would have escorted her down the other side of the hill to take a photograph up close."

"True enough, Mr. Henley," said Stewart. "The lady climbed the hill alone with her gun. In those days the paths were in better repair, you see. After she took her shots, her guests followed to see what she'd bagged on the other side. By then the lady was far ahead of them. While they were climbing one side of the hill, she was descending the other. She'd reached the rabbit by the time they'd struggled to the summit."

Henley's mind switched to 1934: The lady has three cocktails and recalls the thrill of felling that huge stag earlier in the day. She feels exuberant, infallible, eager to continue her streak, so she puts on her boots, waves to her guests, and carries her rifle up the hill south of her home, her guests watching her from the lawn. On the other side of the hill, away from all witnesses, Katherine Tranter gathers lilies in the shallows by the pond. Arriving at the hilltop, the lady spots her and gloats: Here is a gift from the fates, the woman who has stolen her husband. The lady has had three drinks, not enough to impair her aim, but only her judgment. At that moment a rabbit wanders out of the woods. Lady Grampion is impetuous, reckless. She doesn't care if she gets caught. She shoots twice. Surely the first shot is at the rabbit. Then the second at a startled Katherine Tranter. Lady Grampion connects with both. And she hurries down the hillside to sink the body with stones before she retrieves the carcass of the rabbit. Her boots cover the tracks of Katherine Tranter's galoshes in the mud. She just has time before her guests walk up the hillside to see her holding the bloody rabbit triumphantly. Someone takes a photograph of the successful hunter after a fresh kill. The story becomes famous: She nailed the rabbit in only two shots. And Lily Tranter vanishes.

"Stewart," said Henley, "tell the constable to dredge the lily pond south of the Widow Cuddy's home. I think he'll find some bones."

And then, not wanting to think any more about exactly who gave him that oatcake this morning, he asked for another scotch. ●

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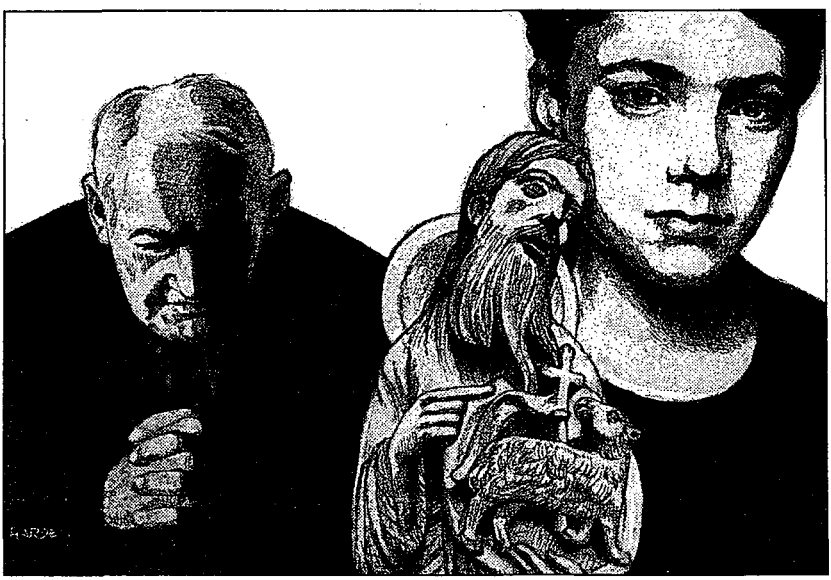

Art by Laurie Harden

THE LAST VIGIL

by Marianne Strong

Machiek Krolewski gave a final rub to his best black shoes and set them down on the floor beneath the pants legs of his best blue suit. Tonight, he would keep the vigil.

He brushed a fold out of the left arm of the suit, then lifted the suit off the hook and peered at it, squinting over the top of his glasses. He brushed a piece of white lint from a lapel, and carefully laid the suit down on the bed. His twenty-year-old suit was hopelessly old-fashioned, but Machiek had had it cleaned and pressed for the vigil. But he'd had to have the cleaner's do the job this year, because his wife Agnieska had died two years ago. The cleaner hadn't done the job with the love Agnieska always poured into it, but the suit looked neat enough.

At least, Machiek thought it did. His pale blue eyes did not always focus clearly anymore, and, in this past year, his eighty-second, Machiek had become aware of a veil that seemed to be moving forward from behind him and cutting off his peripheral vision. Machiek felt that it was the veil of death approaching and he was not terribly unhappy to see it.

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With his old eyes beginning to give out, he'd had to stop reading to the neighborhood children. No matter. They were getting too old and too restless to listen to an old man. Even the youngest, six-year-old Sarah, didn't always bring her latest library book when she came to say hello. Over the past year, Machiek had felt increasingly lonely. He was getting ready to die.

Some days, he almost felt he could welcome death, days when he missed Agnieska, his wife of fifty-two years, and Walter and Chester, his brothers, and Sophie, his sister, all three dead now. Machiek was the only one left of his family. For forty years, he had kept the vigil with his two brothers, but this year he would be alone.

A professor of literature by day, Marianne Wilski Strong finds inspiration for her stories in the town where she grew up, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. She often visits there, researching its coal-mining past and roaming through its many ethnic neighborhoods. The Polish neighborhood in her new story, centered around the parish church, is the setting for a confrontation between a misdirected youth and a pillar of an older generation.

Alone, that is, for the hour that was his of the night's vigil, the ritual of guarding Christ's grave through the night before Easter. All of the men in Mary, Star of Heaven, Parish had always agreed heartily to let Machiek keep the two to three vigil. The earlier hours, even one to two, allowed a man to get back home from the church and grab a few hours' sleep before Easter sunrise Mass at six. The later hours, including three to four, meant that they could go to bed early, wake up in time for their hour of vigil, and stay for the six o'clock Mass.

Last year, Machiek had agreed to take an early vigil hour to satisfy his son, who felt his father needed to sleep at night. As if old people could sleep. So, last year, he had kept vigil from eight to nine. He had disliked it. The parish's staff had still moved about briskly, setting up lilies and candles for sunrise Mass. They had smiled at Machiek and urged him to sit instead of kneel. Alex Seroka and Michael Falchek had offered him their scarves to keep him warm. Raymond Wischak, who had just joined the parish, had even made him a cup of tea and taken him down to the church basement, where they kept the Easter baskets for the poor, to drink it and warm up by the heaters the staff used. Machiek had thanked them, but he had felt old and in the way. He had missed the quiet of the two o'clock vigil. And only in the last half-hour of the vigil had they lit the candle beneath the amber icon.

This year, Machiek would keep the hour he loved. If any Roman

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guard had planned to steal the body of Christ, they would have done so in the middle of the night, between two and three, when everyone was asleep, including insomniacs and early-risers. So, between two and three this year, Machiek would keep watch.

He felt that this year's watch was especially important. He had never been a man given to superstitions. He had never paid attention to prophets or tellers of fortune. He had been a locksmith and he knew that locks kept out real dangers: thieves and maybe even murderers. He saw no use in fearing the future, or ghosts, or old Father Death. If the time was ready for them to come, they would come. Locks would not deter them.

But for the last two weeks, Machiek had had a presentiment. He had to keep this vigil. He was called to it.

Father Malinski had agreed to let him sit the two o'clock vigil, thanks to Raymond Wischak, who had helped persuade Father that that vigil hour really did belong to Machiek. Once more, before I die, Machiek thought. Once more I can watch the marble tomb and the golden icon above.

Machiek looked at his watch. One o'clock. He would leave at one forty-five for his short walk to the church.

Machiek thought about the marble tomb that was set before the altar on Good Fridays. He loved the pale lavender and green streaks that scored the white marble. But it was the amber icon that flooded Machiek's soul with its beauty and its light, like a piece of golden heavenly radiance given to Earth for one night. The amber icon was only two feet high, but placed in its windowed niche above the side altar, it created a miracle each Easter. At eight-thirty, when the candle was placed on the ledge of the niche at the foot of the icon, the flame flickered over the carved tomb of the lower half of the icon, lighting its golden-brown depths. And at six, just as Mass was beginning, the rising sun shone through the upper half of the icon and the figure of Christ burned with the golden splendor of the resurrection. The icon was old, older than Machiek. Back in 1892, when Mary, Star of Heaven, Parish was founded, the Polish priest from Warsaw had brought the icon with him. Even then, the icon was already a hundred years old. And in 1907, when Machiek, a lonely seven-year-old, missing his friends left in Poland, and his mother who had died not two months after their arrival in the New World, saw the golden Christ for the first time, he felt love again.

He had felt love many times since: for Agnieska, his beautiful blond-haired wife; for Robert, his son, a successful American doctor; for his brothers and sister; for friends; for Skip, his mongrel dog, who'd lain at his feet on winter nights for ten years. All this love seemed caught and preserved in the amber, preserved even as amber preserved once-living things for millions of years.

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Tonight, Machiek would see the icon again. Tonight, Machiek felt, he would give back to the icon some of the love it had kept for him. Tonight, Machiek felt, the icon needed him.

He put on his blue suit, blessed himself, and left for the church.

His journey took him one block up South Street and two blocks up Meade Street. Machiek passed Joyce's Flower Shop. It had been simply Zig's Place when Machiek was in the prime of his life, and he and his friends used to gather there to talk over Roosevelt's behavior at Yalta or the latest rise in property taxes or whether or not the Church should get rid of the no-meat-on-Friday ban. Machiek had been for getting rid of the ban. He liked kielbasa, and pot roast, and beef stew.

Now, though, Joyce's place served him better than Zig's could. He bought flowers there for Agnieska's grave whenever their son came in from Boston and drove him up to the cemetery.

Machiek turned up Meade Street. He could see the steps to the main door of the church and, above the main door, the two white angels that flanked the archway.

But he saw something else, too. At the corner of the church farthest up Meade Street from himself, Machiek saw a shadow in the beams from the light over the entrance. The shadow was dark, darker even than the surrounding night, which was brightened only a little by a half-moon that danced in and out of thin, high clouds.

Machiek stopped and stared. From the middle of the shadow, light shone, slivers of light, like flashing blades.

Machiek blinked and the shadow, with its strange glimmers, slipped away into darkness.

The devil, Machiek thought. That's what his sister would have said he saw. But Machiek did not believe in the devil. He believed in evil, though, because he knew what had happened to friends and relatives in Poland in World War II.

Machiek did not know what he had seen tonight. If the shadow were that of a human, the human's purposes were surely evil. But the shadow might have been from a tree branch that moved in the slight wind, its leaves glimmering in the moon's light. It was not always easy to recognize evil, to separate it from the imagination's dark spots.

Machiek moved toward the church, then paused again. He could go back home and call Father Malinski or one of the church staff members. He could call the police to come and check on the church. Wilkes Barre was not immune to the crime that plagued the country.

He looked up as the moon moved in and out from a cloud again. To the left of the moon shone a bright light: a beautiful star. It was not really a star, Machiek's son had told him. It was a planet. It was not Mary, Star of Heaven. But Machiek wanted to believe it was.

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Machiek moved ahead toward the church steps. He had no time to call anyone. He had never been late for his vigil, never kept the previous watcher waiting. Machiek took comfort in that thought. At least for the first minute or two, he would not be alone in the church. He would tell his predecessor about the shadow.

He climbed the church steps, pulling himself up by the iron rail. At the top, he grasped the great curved handle of the door and pulled. Inside, he stood for a moment blinking, adjusting his eyes to the dark of the church, darker than the night, as dark as the shadow he had seen.

Slowly, Machiek's eyes picked out a form in the light down at the side altar. The man on the previous hour's vigil sat in front of the side altar, his head bobbing now and then as if he were fighting off sleep. In front of him, the marble tomb glowed, lit by two side lamps and a row of candles along the bottom of the tomb. In the windowed niche above the altar, the lower half of the icon cast golden gleams from the flickering candlelight.

Machiek stood still, memories flooding him as if they flowed from the golden icon, just as the sap must have flowed from a great pine five million years ago.

The sense of evil retreated before the peace that settled into Machiek's soul. The past flowed into the present and both into the future. He felt that as long as the icon glowed, love would stay alive. Agnieska's love. His love. And they would touch again and flow together.

He moved up the aisle. The slumbering man in front of him started, turned to look at Machiek, and rose. "Ah, Mr. Krolewski," he said. "I'll just let you take my place then." He suppressed a yawn.

Machiek recognized the man. A middle-aged man, in his forties, a man Machiek had seen in church for decades, first as a restless child between his parents, then as a teenager, still restless, then as a young man with a wife, and, of late, as a family man with three children. "Hello," Machiek said, holding out his hand, ashamed that he could not remember the man's name. "I'm sorry. I may be a few minutes late."

The man took Machiek's hand and pressed it. "Not at all. Not at all." He released Machiek's hand and reached back into the pew for his hat, then motioned Machiek into the seat he had just abandoned.

Machiek stepped forward, grasping the top of the pew.

"Uh," the younger man uttered, "uh, you'll be all right?"

Machiek smiled and nodded, still trying to remember the man's name.

"Warm enough for you, is it?" the man said, looking rather nervous.

"Just right," Machiek said. Was his name Karski? Machiek didn't dare try in case he had it wrong.

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"All right then. Goodnight." The man peered at Machiek, shrugged his shoulders slightly, and turned up the aisle.

Machiek stepped into the pew, sat, and settled his spine against the seatback. He knew his back would ache after an hour, but that didn't matter.

Then, Machiek remembered that he had wanted to tell the younger man about the shadow. He turned round. The man was pulling at the main door. Machiek opened his mouth, but he couldn't remember the man's name. He couldn't holler out "Hey!" Machiek was of a generation to whom politeness was important. He turned back to the altar. He would tell the next man to come about the shadow. It probably didn't matter anyway. His old eyes could not be trusted.

But they could see the golden amber above the altar. Machiek half closed his eyes and let the golden glow soothe him. He began to drift into the past again, to relive the time he and Agnieska saw the northern lights. He would have to tell his grandson about them—like sheets of color sent by some king from a desert land. Machiek opened his eyes to look at the icon. He thanked God he could keep the vigil for one more time.

Eddie Draper pulled on his black leather jacket, sat on his bed, and lit a cigarette. His hand shook. He took a few puffs and snuffed out the cigarette. He needed a couple of beers or some marijuana or, better yet, some of the coke he had tried three weeks ago on his sixteenth birthday. But he'd not been able to buy any since he'd gotten laid off from his first job at the garage. Okay, fired, he admitted, for showing up late to work again. For the fiftieth time. He couldn't blame Mr. Morris. Old Mr. Morris had let him stay on even after several warnings. And even lent him thirty bucks which Eddie couldn't pay back.

Eddie opened his bedroom door an inch. Not that his old man, drunk as usual, would care where Eddie was going at two in the morning. But Eddie had to keep this night's activity private. He didn't want to go to jail, even if the rumors were true that coke was easy to get in the county jail.

Eddie slipped out the door and started down the stairs, keeping close to the wall. Sometimes his old man dropped his jacket or car keys or even himself, if he were drunk enough, on the stairs. Eddie didn't want to trip. He set each foot forward cautiously. He froze once when he heard his old man snort. The bed creaked. Silence, then the steady snore. Eddie moved down the last few stairs, ignored the front door, and went to the back of the house. He risked a light in the kitchen to get his bearings, then flipped it off as he stepped outside. In the backyard, the pines that crowded round the back door shielded him from the eyes of any sleepless neighbors.

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In two minutes, Eddie was out of his yard and walking up the hill to Meade Street. He stayed close to the walls of the bar and the barber shop, then cut to the right. He'd go round the block, to avoid the two houses on Meade that had front yards and offered no shadows in which to hide. On South and Grant streets, the houses had no front yards. That meant Eddie could stay close to the walls, lessening the chance that a passing car would see him. He'd have to duck past any lighted windows, but there would be few, if any.

Eddie paused just before a house with a floodlight. He checked his watch. Two-fifteen. He had half an hour. The old man's vigil lasted until three. But Eddie planned to be out of the church by two forty-five, just in case the next man showed up early.

Eddie knew about the vigil. He'd gone to Catholic school, and to church until he was twelve. But when his mother died, he'd stopped going to church. Now, at sixteen, he could stop going to the stupid school. All he had to do was to get this job done right. It had to go right. He was due. A guy couldn't have rotten luck all his life.

Eddie ducked past the floodlight and pulled up the collar of his jacket. It was cold even if it was April. Winds sweeping down the Pennsylvania mountains into the valleys chilled the nights until June.

Shoving his right hand into his pocket, Eddie grasped the blackjack he'd been given. He really didn't like the idea of boffing an old man on the head, but he'd have to do it, hard enough to knock him out, but not, Eddie hoped, enough to do him any harm. Eddie might be a thief, but he was not a killer. Besides, there was no honor and no glory in killing an old man too stupid not to stay home at night.

Eddie turned back onto Meade Street. He could see the church now. He remembered taking his Easter basket to church. His mother always put in colored eggs, some bread, some kielbasa, and some candy: jelly beans. Eddie shook off the memory. Those days were gone. Jelly beans were for kids. He used coke now. He'd just learned how to snort it; he knew where to buy it, and he planned to find out where to sell it. Even if he did land in jail, he'd handle it. He wasn't skinny Eddie anymore. He'd even thought of a cool name for himself. From now on, he'd be The Draper. He was on his way. Maybe in a few years he could blow this town. He hated Wilkes Barre. It was nowhere and he wanted to be somewhere. And someone.

So he had to do this job. He'd been promised five hundred for it. Easy enough. Clobber an old man, grab a piece of junk somebody thought was valuable, and deliver the goods.

Eddie grinned. He was probably the only guy in Wilkes Barre who knew that the church staffer who sold marijuana also operated a theft ring, had set up this job and set up the old man.

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Eddie slipped into the shadows of the right wall of the church and looked round. He didn't want to go up the front steps with the entrance light until he was sure no one was around.

He checked across the street. The parking lot of the nursing home held only five cars. With all the old geezers asleep, Eddie thought, the place probably needed only a couple of nurses, and they were probably looking at boyfriend pictures. He wondered what they'd think if they knew he was about to pull a heist.

The lights of most of the nearby houses were out. All the working slaves and their crabby wives were asleep.

Eddie took a quick glance up and down Meade Street. No cars. The only cars in sight were those flying north or south on Interstate 81 over on the East Mountain. Going south, you got to Interstate 80 and that took you into New York. Eddie followed the lights of a car as far south as he could, wondering if the guy was headed to New York. No matter. Eddie could head to New York as soon as he got himself about a thousand dollars. Getting that incredible amount had seemed about as likely as winning a Lamborghini at a church bazaar until a week ago when this job had come up.

Now, things were different. Eddie felt his luck had changed for the better. All he had to do was to get on with the job.

So, do it, he told himself. He looked up and down Meade Street again. Best to be careful. He looked at his watch. Two-thirty. He had to do it now or forget it and go back home. If he did that, he'd have to ask his old man for money next week.

Eddie moved out from the wall and took the steps two by two. At the top, he yanked open the heavy wood door and slipped inside. Not wanting to alert the old man, he let the door rest against his arm and close slowly. He winced when the door creaked a little.

The church was dark and Eddie waited while his eyes adjusted. No one moved in the church. The old man hadn't heard the door.

Eddie tiptoed over to the right aisle and peered down toward the side altar. He saw the yellow slab in the niche up on the altar. He didn't understand why it was worth a damn penny, but he didn't care either.

He caught his breath. He could see the old man hunched over in the pew, looking like a skinny kid rather than a grown man. Eddie hadn't expected that. He felt kind of sick. He swallowed and forced himself forward. After all, the old guy might look like some bent-over little elf, but he probably beat his kid every time the kid came home five minutes late.

Eddie crept closer. Halfway down the aisle, he stopped. He had to move fast now or give it up. He had to get down the aisle quietly, with no noise to alert the old man. He didn't want the old man to turn around. He didn't want to have to see his face. Pulling the blackjack from his pocket, Eddie headed for the old man.

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Lost in the past, Machiek watched the prow of the sailboat slip through the blue lake waters, so like the waters of the lake he'd known as a child in Suwalki, Poland. Above, the sun glowed gold. Machiek turned to his six-year-old son and motioned toward the right channel of the lake.

The boy moved the tiller gently to the left while Machiek loosened the mainsail. The mast creaked as it strained in the wind. The boat flew over the water and Agnieska's hair, golden blond, lifted and fluttered. Machiek looked up at the sun.

The lake faded away and Machiek returned to the church. The amber carving still glowed in the candlelight, and Christ's tomb remained undisturbed.

A sharp tingle ran up Machiek's spine. He knew the lake and the sailboat had been only a vision from the past. But the creak still echoed in his ears, his ears that had gained strength while his eyes had weakened. He had heard a creak, here, now. He knew that he was not alone in the church, and he knew that it was too early for the next man to come for the next hour's watch.

Something evil was at hand. He rose, stepped out of the pew, and turned to the back of the church. He saw the man advancing on him, the Roman come to steal Christ's body. The man stopped, stared at Machiek, then raised his arm. Machiek raised his own arm in self-defense.

Eddie skidded on the flagstone floor of the church aisle. Grabbing the spire of a pew, he jerked himself to a stop. Three feet away, the old man had risen and turned around.

Eddie stared at the wrinkled face, the grey hair, the sky-blue eyes. He dropped the blackjack. Sweat broke out on his forehead and his lip. He lifted a hand to wipe it away.

The old man lifted his arm.

Eddie saw the uplifted arm of his father, about to strike him again. He cried out and pushed his father as hard as he could.

He looked down at the old man who was not his father, the old man who was his victim. The old man's head had hit the back of a seat, and he had sunk down, his body lying on the floor between two pews.

Eddie wiped the sweat from his forehead. He could hardly breathe. He had killed a man. He blinked, backed away, turned, and ran up the aisle.

But at the door, he stopped. If he went outside, he went as a killer with no one to help him.

He realized he had to get the amber carving. He had to have the five hundred dollars. He had to get out and to New York.

Turning back, he started up the side aisle, clambered through

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two pews to the main aisle to avoid the old man, then cut back to the side aisle.

At the altar, he hoisted himself up onto its flat top. For a moment, he thought about the mortal sin of stepping on an altar, but then he remembered that he had killed a man. No sin mattered now. He remembered something from catechism class. The mark of Cain. He was doomed to wander now, forever. Nothing mattered.

Eddie grabbed the edge of a niche, put his foot onto a ledge, and pulled himself up. One more step up and he was able to reach the window niche. His fingers found the side of the amber icon. It felt warm and almost sticky and soft, as if his fingers would sink in, leaving his fingerprints there forever.

The candle fell and sputtered out.

Eddie pulled the icon down and lowered himself to the main surface of the altar. All he wanted now was to escape. He jumped off the altar, unzipped his jacket, shoved in the icon, and started up the aisle.

When he almost stepped on the old man's legs, he stopped, looked down, and caught his breath, horrified.

The old man's eyelids lifted and the sky-blue eyes stared at Eddie. They did not accuse or plead. They just stared, as if to ask Eddie why he had committed this crime. Why had he stolen from a church? Why had he stepped on an altar? Why had he struck an old man?

Because, Eddie thought, because my mother died.

Eddie turned and ran up the aisle, grasping the icon to his chest. It seemed to burn him.

He yanked at the door, almost falling backward when it swung into him, and stepped out onto the top of the church steps. The door closed behind him.

Leaning against the door, Eddie closed his eyes, his chest heaving, the icon lying heavily against it.

"Give it to me, Eddie."

Eddie jerked away from the door and opened his eyes. He stared at the black figure in front of him, hardly able to remember who it was.

"Did you get it, Eddie?"

Suddenly, Eddie hated the man in front of him. This man had led him into murder, the murder of an old man who would haunt him forever.

"Give it to me, Eddie," the man hissed.

Eddie unzipped his jacket and pulled out the icon. He held it in front of him and stared at it. Why was it so valuable? He looked at the figure of a risen Christ. It was beautiful, even he could see that, beautiful with its beams raying out from the figure, golden even in this dim church light. So beautiful, it might be worth dying for. The old man had died for something beautiful. Eddie wondered what he would die for. Drugs, maybe.

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Suddenly, he did not want to give up the icon. It was the only beautiful thing he had had in his life since his mother died. "Give it to me, Eddie. Someone's coming."

Eddie glanced up when, at the bottom of the hill, the headlights of a car came into view. Eddie began to slip the icon back into his jacket.

He felt the shove at the same time that the man yanked the icon from him.

Hopping on one foot, Eddie tried to regain his balance. The world tilted, and he tumbled. His back struck a step first, sending a searing pain up and down his spine. Then his head flopped back against a step. Eddie looked up at a dark sky with pinpoints of light in it and one bright light. The lights looked golden, like the icon. Then, a shadow blocked the sky. Eddie felt his head lifted and dropped. Blues, reds, golds exploded, like some celestial display. It was the last thing Eddie ever saw.

Machiek lay in his bed, looking out the window at the twin steeples of St. Mary's. His head really didn't hurt anymore. Just a dull throb now and then. In a day or two, he would be able to get up and out. But he felt paralyzed.

Someone had stolen the icon on his vigil. Machiek cried. He had failed. The police, Father Malinski, everyone had told him he could not have stopped the theft, that he could not have fought off Eddie. The young man was too strong. It had not been Machiek's fault, everyone had told him. And perhaps, someday, the church could buy another icon.

But Machiek knew that the amber icon could not be replaced, and he knew that Father Malinski grieved over its loss. Machiek did too. The young man had stolen not just the icon, but Machiek's memories, his happiness, the warmth the icon had bestowed.

But then, the young man, Eddie, had died. He had fallen, and someone else, perhaps a partner, the police had said, had taken the icon. The thief had probably already taken the icon to New York or someplace where a collector had been willing to pay a good deal of money and to ask no questions about the origin of the icon.

Machiek shifted in his bed, trying to recall exactly what had happened that night. Why hadn't Mr. Zalewski, driving up to the church to take the next vigil, seen the second man? Although he had arrived just after Eddie had died, Mr. Zalewski had seen no one. He had parked his car right in front of the church, got out immediately, started up the steps, and found Eddie's body. No one had run from the scene. Not down the steps, nor around the church. The moon had come out from the clouds and had shed enough light around for Mr. Zalewski to see very well. He was sure no one else had left the church.

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But Machiek knew there had been someone else. He had seen the shadow just before he had entered the church for his vigil. The shadow with the glimmering blades. He had seen those blades before. He knew that, but he could not think. His head throbbed, and his memory had been stolen with the icon.

Machiek sighed. He was a doddering old man and no one had paid any attention to his insistence that he had seen an evil shadow. He hadn't been able to describe the man. He had not seen his face at all. Only those glimmers along blades; probably, Machiek's son had told him, some effect of his macular degeneration. Don't think about the theft, his son had said, just forget it and get better.

But Machiek couldn't forget. The icon had been stolen on his vigil. Its golden beams had been replaced by the cold silver glimmers from the blades. There was no warmth in them, no warmth at all. Machiek shivered, feeling how cold the blades were.

Then he remembered. He sat bolt upright and grabbed his head. Despite the throbbing, he remembered. He had seen those blades before, where there should have been warmth. And there had been warmth, but not from the blades and not from the human who had worn the belt buckle with the blades. The only warmth then had come from heaters.

Machiek knew. He knew the human behind the shadow. Machiek's old blue eyes, with their macular degeneration, had focused on glimmering blades. To his old eyes, the blades had glared and gleamed more than they would have for younger eyes, eyes that would see more, but focus less on light. The light told him who had taken the icon. Moreover, he knew why Mr. Zalewski had seen no one. The intruder had simply disappeared inside the church, waiting out the next vigil-keeper's discovery of Machiek and the theft. Machiek also knew where the intruder must have stashed the icon until he could remove it undetected. Machiek vowed to recover the icon. But he had to do it today.

"I'll be leaving now, Mr. Krolewski." Nurse Roque came into Machiek's room. She put a fresh pitcher of water, one ulcer pill, one nitro, and two aspirins on the table by his bed. Then, she folded an index card and placed it on the table by the pills. "I've marked the times you should take the pills. You can see it, can't you?"

"Yes, thank you," Machiek said. He would have liked to tell her that he didn't need a note. Not now. He had his memory back, even some short-term memory if he didn't have to remember too much. But Machiek said nothing. He had been raised to be polite always, especially to women.

"I'll see you tomorrow, then," the nurse said.

"Could I ask you to do one more thing?" Machiek asked.

"What is it?"

"Please, could you move my clock back to the bed table?"

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"If you like. But it will crowd the table, what with the pills and water here. You won't need to worry about the time. You should just rest."

"I just like to see the time when I wake up."

Nurse Roque shrugged. "As you wish." She moved the clock back from the dresser to the table and bid Machiek goodbye.

Machiek waved goodbye, listened for the front door to close, and waited until Nurse Roque had had time to get into her car and drive away. He picked up the receiver of his phone and dialed a number. After six rings, he hung up and looked at the clock. It was eleven-thirty. He had one half-hour to get back to the church. If he could get in and out by twelve, he could save the icon. He had no time to call someone else for help.

Machiek got out of bed. When he rose to his feet, he felt a little shaky, but after a minute, the slight dizziness left him. His head cleared. He put on his clothes and shoes with slow deliberation. He could not afford the fumbling that came with haste. Going over to the workbench he had kept as a memento of his career after his retirement, he extracted a master key.

In five minutes, he was out of his apartment and on his way to the church.

At Meade Street, he waited until no cars were approaching in any direction, then climbed the steps to the main entrance of the church. On one of the steps, he saw a dark stain: the blood of the young man who had taken the icon.

His heart pounding, Machiek entered the church. He paused, letting his old eyes adjust. He could not quite catch his breath, but he had no time to wait for so earthly a thing as oxygen.

He made his way down the right side aisle, looked up at the empty niche where the icon would have rested for Easter week, then went over to a side door. Machiek pulled out his master key and slipped it into the lock. It clicked, and he pushed open the door slowly and quietly. The pounding in his heart increased.

He stared down the narrow spiral stairs into the darkness. No light and no noise rose from the church basement. He had made it in time.

Grabbing the rail on the right and touching the wall on the left to help guide himself, Machiek started down the steps. But it was too dark to continue. Yet he did not dare turn on a light.

He stood still for a moment, in despair that his old feeble brain had not signaled him to bring a flashlight. Then he turned and climbed back up the few steps he had taken. He stopped, gasped for breath, then walked toward the main altar. He felt almost sacrilegious lifting the Easter vigil candle, the paschal candle, with its figure of the innocent, sacrificial lamb, from its great candlestick.

The candle, six inches thick and twenty-two inches high, was

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heavy, but Machiek managed to grasp it firmly between his hands. He would have to get down the stairs without holding the rail. He would trust in God and in his determination.

He wound down the narrow stairs into the basement, the paschal candle lighting his way. At the bottom of the stairs, he set the candle down carefully on a wooden table. It lit the basement only dimly, but enough for Machiek to see the baskets on the table, the Easter baskets, donated by parishioners, that would be distributed this afternoon to poor families—a job for which Raymond Wischak had volunteered.

Machiek looked over the baskets, some thirty of them. Only one was big enough, more like a picnic basket than an Easter basket. He reached over two smaller baskets and lifted out the big one. It was heavy. He pulled up the wicker cover.

Gold gleamed from inside. Machiek picked up the icon from its resting place on loaves of Easter bread baked by the church women for the poor.

Lovingly, Machiek touched the carving of the tomb. He moved his fingers toward the figure of the risen Christ. The amber was warm and soft.

At the top of the stairs, the door opened.

Machiek froze, his hand still on the amber. His heart seemed like a block of ice in him, its cold spreading outward, freezing more and more of him. Only his hand on the amber was warm.

At the top of the stairs, the door slammed shut. Footsteps started down the stairs.

Machiek knew who was coming. He knew who had taken charge of the baskets this year. He knew who wore the belt buckle he had seen last night, and he knew the danger he was in. Raymond Wischak would kill him, just as he had killed Eddie, that sad broken boy whom Raymond had supposedly befriended.

Machiek knew that his old body could not fight off the strength of Raymond Wischak. But Machiek knew, too, that he would never allow the icon to be stolen again. He did not like to inflict pain on any creature, but he knew what he had to do.

He placed the icon back on its bed of Easter bread and picked up the paschal candle, grasping it again with both hands. The cold of his body seemed to freeze his hands to the candle, to clamp them to it with all the crushing strength of ice.

Machiek backed away from the doorway and waited.

When Raymond Wischak stepped out from the stairs, Machiek held the candle out. Its flame lit Wischak's startled eyes and white cheekbones, leaving the rest of his face in shadow.

Machiek glanced down at the silver swords on the belt buckle, then thrust the candle's flame directly into Wischak's face.

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The candle flew from Machiek's hands with the force of Raymond's thrust forward.

Raymond Wischak roared and bent over, clutching at his right eye. Machiek grabbed the icon, surged past Raymond, and climbed up the first few stairs. The effort cost him a knot of pain that bound his chest tight in an icy lock.

Behind him, he heard a crash. He leaned heavily against the wall, clutching the icon to his chest as if to let its warmth penetrate his heart one more time, and turned.

Raymond had crashed into a heavy metal coatrack. He moaned and held his head, then pulled at the coatrack, trying to lift himself from the floor.

Machiek knew he had little time left. He turned and struggled up the stairs.

By the time he reached the top, his breathing was a hollow rattle. He lurched toward the side altar and leaned against it.

Willing what strength he had left to flow to his arms, he lifted the icon and set it down on the altar, then slipped to the floor.

With a last effort, he turned as the door from the sacristy opened. Father Malinski came through the doorway and ran to Machiek. Machiek whispered to the priest, then looked up into the light coming from the sacristy. He saw Agnieska. It was the last thing he saw on Earth.

Raymond Wischak claimed first that what Machiek had whispered to the priest was the raving of a mad old man. But never having been able to stand physical pain, Raymond had eventually broken under the anguish of his burned right eye and his gashed forehead. He confessed that he and Eddie had planned to steal the icon and sell it to an antique dealer in New York.

He did not confess to the murder of Eddie, but his lawyer told him that the scratches on his hands, his skin under Eddie's fingernails, and the fibers of his shirt on Eddie's jacket were damning evidence.

Finally, Raymond confessed the murder to the Wilkes Barre police at the same time that the choir of Mary, Star of Heaven, Parish sang the "Dies Irae" at Machiek's funeral.

The amber icon glowed in its niche, keeping vigil over Machiek's coffin. ●

NOTE TO READERS: *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* is now on the Web! In addition to excerpts of upcoming fiction, our page provides a short history of the magazine and a list of *EQMM*'s many awards. We share the site with *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* and *Mystery Scene Magazine,* and links have already been established with several other mystery pages. It's *the* web site for mystery fans: Don't miss it! Visit us at http://www.mysterypages.com

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VULTURE IN THE MIST

by Edward D. Hoch

Edward D. Hoch's Revolutionary War series once again picks up the thread of the real-life story of Benedict Arnold. Even Arnold's attempted boarding of the British warship *Vulture* is straight from the history books. Through this mesh of historical fact, Mr. Hoch weaves a classical murder mystery, while also bringing to life a repeat cast of fictional characters, including series hero Alexander Swift.

Benedict Arnold's wife Peggy had been with him at Robinson House, across the river from West Point and about two miles below it, for some days when Alexander Swift saw her for the first time at the fort, standing alone in the September sunlight. He had been a guest at their wedding in Philadelphia, representing General Washington, and it was the first time he'd seen her since then.

"You're looking as lovely as ever, Peggy," he told her. "When did you arrive?"

She was slim and blond, a blue-eyed beauty not yet nineteen when the thirty-eight-year-old Arnold wooed and married her in Philadelphia a year and a half earlier. Now she was a mother with a new baby son, caught up in something she barely understood. "I reached Joshua Smith's house outside Haverstraw last week," she told him, "and General Arnold met me there."

"It's good to see you again," Swift said, though he hardly meant it. Peggy's presence meant that Arnold need not worry about her safety if he was indeed the traitor about to deliver West Point to the British. And their meeting place at Joshua Smith's house was further reason for suspicion. Smith seemed a loyal but somewhat gullible young man given to empty chatter. He would believe anything Arnold told him. Washington had little use for the man, though on occasion necessity forced him to stay overnight at the Smith house.

"This is my first visit to West Point. It's lovely seeing the river from here."

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"A commanding view, in more ways than one."

She pointed out toward the water. "And that is the famous Hudson chain?"

Swift nodded. "Put there to keep the British from sailing upriver. Your husband found a damaged link which is presently being replaced at the mill."

She turned to smile at him. "I never thought I'd be a general's wife."

He saw her husband, his hawklike face turned toward the sky, hobbling on his bad leg up from the garrison. "I'd better let you go join the general," he said, waving a greeting to Arnold as he headed in the opposite direction. Chatting with Peggy was one thing, but he was reluctant just then to confront the man he suspected of plotting treason. As a civilian who undertook special assignments for General Washington, Swift was certain to be considered a spy by Arnold.

Instead, Swift walked over to the Nugget of Gold, the inn where he stayed when he was at West Point. Molly McVey was a waitress in the tavern there, a woman who'd given him much comfort when his wife left him for a British officer in New York City. She was in there now, tending to the bar, and he knew she'd been watching him through the window. "I saw you with Peggy Arnold. She's put on some weight since the wedding."

Swift smiled slightly. "She's had a baby since the wedding."

"She has extravagant ways."

"So has Arnold. It may be his downfall. He is so deeply in debt that he may be seeking money from the British."

A sutler named Horace Flexman, who sold all manner of supplies at the fort, entered the tavern at that point and they ceased their conversation. A bit later, when Molly had been relieved by the regular bartender, she signaled Swift to follow her upstairs to her room. "I've heard something that may interest you," she told him.

"What's that?" He knew at once that her invitation had no amorous intent.

"As you know, General Arnold has a crew of six bargemen on duty at all times, with a whaleboat docked down the hill from Robinson House. They stand by on two twelve-hour shifts. Jed Buckins, in charge of one crew, was in here drinking late last night. After his tongue was loosened he told me they'd rowed the general downriver a week ago Sunday, the tenth. He stayed overnight at Joshua Smith's house and early in the Monday morning mist continued downstream almost as far as Dobbs Ferry. He had the bargemen row very close to the *Vulture*, a British ship accompanied by three gunboats, but they had no flag of truce. As the whaleboat approached, the gunboats opened fire. One shot

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struck an oar blade and shattered it. Arnold ordered the bargemen to retreat and pull into a nearby cove. Some of our soldiers met him there, and he immediately wrote a letter for delivery to General Washington, claiming—as he also told the bargemen and the soldiers—that he'd been inspecting beacons along the river when fired upon. Buckins believes that wasn't true, that he was planning to board the *Vulture* for a meeting of some sort and was angry at being fired upon and then seen by our troops."

Swift found the story both interesting and alarming. If Buckins was right, Arnold had actually planned to meet with the enemy, only somehow the plans went afoul. Today was Thursday, the twenty-first, and he wondered if the meeting had actually taken place by now. Somehow he had to find out. Washington himself was due to arrive for a visit this weekend. If his suspicions were correct, West Point could be in British hands by then.

"Do you know any of the other bargemen besides Jed Buckins?" he asked.

"Most of them come in for an ale when they're off duty. They work in shifts, of course, six men at a time. They transport General Arnold between West Point and his residence across the river, as well as up and down the river on inspection trips."

"Write down as many names as you can remember," he suggested, handing her a piece of paper.

"Some I just know by sight, others by nicknames. These four I'm sure of. They're buddies of Jed's. There's one more on the crew but I don't know his name. He doesn't come in here."

Swift glanced at the names she'd written: Samuel Fain, Red Heron, Jonathan Springwater, and Martin Cheever. He knew Fain and Heron fairly well, but the other two he knew by sight only. "I'll talk to them," he said. "If you learn anything else let me know at once."

As Swift was leaving the Nugget of Gold he spotted the sutler, Flexman, ahead on the path. He caught up with the man and engaged him in conversation.

"I know you sell fishing gear and the like. What about oars?"

"Oars?" He grinned at Swift. "You and the lady thinking about taking a moonlight canoe trip?"

"I was thinking of larger oars, ones for General Arnold's whaleboats. Do you handle anything that big?"

"Don't tell me another one has broken! I just supplied one last week and that's all I had in my stock."

"Who came to you for it?"

"One of the general's bargemen, Springwater by name."

"Did he say how his oar had been damaged?"

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"Hit a submerged rock, I guess. He left it on the shore somewhere."

Swift knew that it would have taken more than a submerged rock to splinter a heavy whaleboat oar. "Have you seen Springwater at the fort today?" he asked.

"He's around somewhere. His crew works the night and early morning hours."

"Do you know the others?"

The sutler shook his head. "Only Springwater by name. I've seen the others around."

"Keep your eyes and ears open. There may be some sort of plot afoot. General Washington will pay well for any information you can supply."

"I'll remember that," Flexman promised.

Alexander Swift thanked him and continued along a path rutted by cannon wheels to the garrison headquarters, where coded messages from General Washington, delivered by courier, sometimes awaited him. There was one such letter today and he hurried back to his room to decode it. The message was dated the previous Monday, the eighteenth, and read: *While crossing the river by ferry this morning in the company of Arnold and Lafayette, I observed the enemy warship* Vulture *anchored off Teller's Point. Do you have knowledge of why it is so dangerously far up the Hudson?*

Alexander Swift took a deep breath. Washington had been in Arnold's company only four days ago, obviously still placing his trust in the man. But the more important news was that the *Vulture* had sailed north from Dobbs Ferry to Teller's Point, within sight of Joshua Smith's house.

Realizing that he must learn more about Arnold's attempt to board the *Vulture*, Swift headed for the dock where bargemen often congregated when not on duty. He recognized Red Heron at once, a slender red-haired man with squinty eyes and a pale complexion. Not even rowing on the river had brought much color to his face, and his eyebrows were so light that they seemed nonexistent.

"How are you, Red?" he asked. "Still working with the night crew?"

"That I am, Alex. We get in a lot of slumber time in our tent over at Robinson House. The general doesn't travel much after dark, though Buckins tells me we may be rowing this night."

Swift kept the conversation casual, shifting to the weather. "Do you think it will be a bad winter?"

Red Heron shrugged. "Not as bad as three winters ago at Valley Forge."

"You were there with Washington?"

"I was there. Lost a toe to frostbite. The general still remembers me, always has a kind word when he sees me."

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"It was a bad time," Swift agreed. He glanced at the other men chatting in groups along the river's edge. "Have you seen Jed Buckins today?"

"He's probably still asleep. They were playing hazard with dice most of the night while the rest of us were trying to sleep."

"Who was Buckins playing with?"

"The Indian, Onquoit."

Swift remembered now that Onquoit, a member of the Seneca tribe, was the sixth member of the whaleboat crew. That was why he did not frequent the tavern with the others. It was not too surprising to find an Indian among the soldiers at the West Point garrison since George Washington's first military mentor had been an Iroquois chief known as the Half-King. "The six of you are close, aren't you?"

"I guess so. We work together, sleep in the same tent, bathe in the river together."

"What do you think of Benedict Arnold?"

Heron shrugged. "He's the general. I do what he says."

Swift walked on, searching for others in Jed Buckins's crew. The other whaleboat was docked slightly downriver on the other side, by Robinson House, a good indication that the day crew had rowed Arnold and Peggy back home. The rambling two-story mansion also housed two of Arnold's aides, Colonel Varick and Major Franks, but they rarely used the boat unless accompanying General Arnold.

There was a sudden burst of laughter from near the blockhouse overlooking the Hudson, and Swift spotted two of the bargemen, Cheever and Fain, talking with some of the other soldiers. He strode up the embankment to join them. Cheever was a rough-looking man with a scarred face, which he'd acquired as a seaman aboard one of the British merchant ships. Fain was very young and handsome, popular with the women in the area. When he saw Swift approaching he said, "I hear General Washington will be visiting us on the weekend."

Many of the soldiers knew of Swift's close connection with Washington, but he tried to keep the relationship vague. "So they say," he replied. "Have you seen Springwater around or is he still asleep?"

It was the scarred Cheever who replied. "He's up. I saw him heading for the Nugget of Gold."

Swift found the oarsman at the bar in the Nugget. Molly wasn't in sight as he rested next to Springwater and ordered an ale. "I hear you had an accident with an oar last week."

Springwater was a man in his forties with a weathered face and a deep scowl. "Where'd you hear that?"

"One of the sutlers mentioned selling an oar."

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"Yeah, that would be Flexman. I don't know what happened. Hit a rock or something. Maybe a shark bit it off." He was still scowling but there was a bit of humor in his gray eyes.

"Someone said you might have had a run-in with the British navy."

His eyes narrowed. "You hear a lot, Mr. Swift."

"Just talk." He realized he would get no further information from Springwater, but he already had all the confirmation he needed. Washington would be interested in the true facts behind Arnold's account of the shooting.

Swift spent the night with Molly, listening to the soldiers singing in the tavern below. In the early morning he walked along the river for a time. The mist was still too thick for him to see down to Robinson House on the other shore, so he was not certain if the whaleboat had returned from its nighttime journey. Later, as he headed over to the fort, he came upon Molly, hurrying along the path. "Alex, I've been looking for you," she told him. "That sutler, Flexman, left a message for you. He said it was important." She produced an envelope with the sutler's business seal on the back.

He opened it at once and read the message. *Swift—I have news for you. Gen. Arnold overnight at Smith's house, met secretly with British major, John André by name. I am in danger. Meet me at one on far side of Crazy Creek—H. Flexman.*

"Is it important?" she asked.

"Very important. I must go to meet him."

Crazy Creek was well named, a wide but shallow stream, rarely more than a foot deep, that followed a twisting path through the woods before emptying into the Hudson just south of West Point. When he reached it, Swift removed his boots and stockings and waded across, keeping as dry as possible. It was a few minutes after one o'clock, but he saw no sign of the sutler. Then he heard a gasping wheeze and found Flexman doubled up behind a bush. His hands were trying vainly to stanch the flow of blood from a gaping chest wound. A bloody bayonet lay nearby.

He knelt by the dying man's side. "Flexman, it's Swift! Who did this to you?"

"Arnold's oarsman. I followed them by canoe last night . . . saw Arnold meet with André near Smith's house. Overheard them. Link removed from Hudson chain. . . ."

"I know that. What else did you hear?"

"British warships will break through chain Monday morning. Arnold will surrender West Point at noon."

"Good God! Where is André now, back on board the *Vulture?*"

Flexman shook his head. "Shore battery fired on *Vulture,* drove it downriver. André . . . stranded at Smith's house."

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"How will he—?" Swift started to ask, but suddenly a gush of blood choked off Flexman's words. He died before he could speak again.

Swift got to his feet, trembling with frustration. Here was solid evidence of Arnold's treason at last, but the only witness to it was dead. He covered his eyes in a silent prayer for the sutler, then searched for evidence of the crime. Flexman's boots were dry, which meant that he'd carried them and had time to put them back on before the killer struck. Over toward the creek Swift came upon a recent bootprint in the damp soil, partly filled with water. It seemed about the size of his own, but it was impossible to measure with any accuracy.

He could not involve himself by reporting the killing and arousing Arnold's suspicions of him. It would be left for someone else to find the dead man, perhaps days or weeks from now. He recrossed the creek, wiped his feet, and put his stockings and boots back on. Then he gave some thought to Major André's situation. If the man was trapped at Smith's house as the sutler had said, then he had not yet been able to return to New York with timing for the attack on West Point.

Yet General Arnold surely would have arranged some way for him to get back. Assuming the *Vulture* had retreated as far south as Dobbs Ferry, what would be the most likely course for Arnold to follow? He would issue a safe-conduct pass. André, wearing civilian clothes, could pass through the American lines and rejoin the *Vulture* at Dobbs Ferry for the trip to New York. He would carry on his person Arnold's secret report with its timing for the attack. Signing the pass would implicate Arnold, of course, but by Monday noon all would be revealed in any event.

Friday night and much of Saturday passed uneventfully as the body of the sutler remained undiscovered. Swift could not move until he knew with some certainty what had happened to Major André. He sought out the Seneca Indian, Onquoit, as the oarsman most likely to tell him something of value, but the man spoke very little. Yes, they had been out Thursday night with General Arnold, and they had returned Friday morning from Smith's house. But nothing unusual had occurred. Swift was hesitant about revealing too much to the Seneca, for fear that he might be Flexman's murderer. There was little doubt in his mind that at least one of the six bargemen was an agent of Arnold's, and may have been carrying out Arnold's orders when he bayoneted Flexman.

By Saturday evening the mood of the garrison had undergone a subtle change that even Molly commented upon. "The troops seem ill at ease tonight," she told Swift. "There's been no singing all evening and that's unusual, especially for a Saturday."

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When Swift encountered one of Arnold's aides, Major Franks, that evening the reason became clear. He'd occasionally chatted with the foppish young man at the Nugget of Gold and now the major told him, "There's something brewing that I don't understand and can't find out. All I can say is, look out!"

"What's the trouble?"

"That man Joshua Smith appeared at Robinson House this afternoon with some sort of important news for the general. They went into Arnold's private office and closed the door. Neither Colonel Varick nor myself has ever fully trusted Smith. I overheard a snatch of conversation between the two, something about Smith guiding some person through enemy lines. Then he stayed for dinner and got into a shouting match with Colonel Varick and myself."

"Over what?"

"He tried to say the Continental dollar was virtually worthless and I called him a scoundrel. Mrs. Arnold was so upset she left the table and went upstairs. I departed soon after and told the general I would tender my resignation. Whatever is going on with that man Smith, I don't like it. General Arnold is far too friendly with him. I hope to speak directly to General Washington when he arrives at Robinson House tomorrow."

Swift pondered what he'd heard. "Why did you call Smith a scoundrel?"

It took Franks a moment to respond. "Colonel Varick received a letter from New York this morning. It contained information that the man is suspected of being a double agent, selling information to both sides and using his house as a secret meeting place for traitors to our cause."

"Those are serious charges."

"Most serious," Major Franks agreed. "I fear for General Arnold's reputation if he continues meeting with the man."

"You and Varick have not warned him of this?"

"He seems quite content dealing with Smith. He would hear nothing said against him."

Later, when he was alone, Swift stood on the shore gazing through the darkness in the direction of Robinson House. If this Major André had successfully made it back to British headquarters in New York, enemy warships might be sailing up the Hudson by this time Sunday night, prepared to take over West Point on Monday morning. Washington was on his way here, but his exact location was unknown. An attack on Monday morning might even capture him along with West Point.

Swift had to do something, but what?

Early on Sunday morning he arranged to be at dockside when the night crew of bargemen completed their shift and returned to

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West Point while the day shift replaced them in their own boat. Having spoken with everyone but Jed Buckins, he sought out the crew leader, who'd first told Molly the story of the splintered oar.

"Jed," he called out. "How is the river today?"

"Misty coming across, but the sun will soon clear it off. You're up early, aren't you?"

"I hoped we could have a few words before you turn in for some sleep."

Buckins squinted at him. "What about?"

"Your visits downriver with General Arnold."

"I got nothing to say about that."

"I understand British ships fired on you earlier this month."

"A full report of that was dispatched to General Washington."

"But I don't think Washington knows Arnold was attempting to board the *Vulture* when the shooting started."

Buckins cursed and spat on the ground. "That Molly told you, didn't she? I should have known better than to loosen my tongue around her."

"There are bad things happening here," Swift warned. "You don't want to be on the wrong side."

"Watch your own self, Mr. Swift. General Arnold holds the winning hand here."

"We'll see."

Later that Sunday Swift found Molly busy waiting on tables at the Nugget of Gold. The place was crowded, but he saw none of the bargemen nor either of Arnold's aides. "What time do you finish?" he asked her.

"They'll all be out of here before midnight. Why do you ask?"

"I have to ask a favor of you, Molly. I see no other way around it. There is no one else I can trust. Washington is on his way to Robinson House, and I'm afraid he's riding into a British trap. He must be warned before he reaches there tonight or tomorrow morning. If I row you across the river, could you wait for him on the trail? He'll have a large party of aides and soldiers so you cannot miss him. Deliver this letter into his hands. He knows you and will act on this information."

She stared at the letter in his hand. "What does it say?"

"That I have information General Arnold is a traitor, prepared to deliver West Point into British hands at noon tomorrow."

"My God! Are they on their way?"

"Their warships should be sailing up the Hudson right now, and the chain with its missing link will not stop them. I'd go to meet Washington myself but I must remain here and try to contact what few officers I can trust. If I guess wrong and am arrested, at least you can still warn him."

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She hesitated only a moment. "I'll get off work and come with you now," she decided. "You can rely on me, Alex."

"You may have to give up a night's sleep if Washington is late."

"That's little price to pay."

She changed into dark clothing and they hurried through the gathering darkness to the river's edge where there were always boatmen to ferry soldiers and civilians across. A powerful man named Eiger, well known to Swift, rowed them across for his usual fee. On the other side, just below the Robinson House dock, Molly left the boat with Swift's letter safely stowed in her bodice.

He held her for a moment and they kissed. "I'll come for you in the morning," he told her. "The trail Washington's party will take is just at the top of this hill."

He gave a final wave from the boat as she disappeared from view.

Alexander Swift spent much of the night in conversations with the few officers he thought he could trust. He relied especially on those who'd expressed concern when Arnold removed a link from the Hudson chain, supposedly because it was damaged, and others who questioned the wisdom of Arnold's dispatching a large company of soldiers to cut firewood for the coming winter. Both actions seemed to weaken West Point's defenses, making it more vulnerable to attack.

As dawn approached he had a half-dozen men in key positions, ready to act at the first sign of an attack. If the sutler's information was correct, it would hardly be enough, but it might give Washington time to act. As for General Arnold, no one was brave enough to move against him on the basis of Swift's dubious evidence.

At the first sign of daylight, Swift was at the dock again, peering through the mist toward Robinson House. The second whaleboat and its day shift had departed earlier to relieve the night men, but there was no evidence of the night shift's return. It was impossible to see across the river but, after a time, one of the boats appeared. It was Washington's party, with the general himself standing in the prow as he must have done when he crossed the Delaware a few years earlier.

"Mr. Swift!" he called by way of greeting. "A friendly face at last! Is General Arnold here?"

"I sent Molly McVey to intercept you with a message. Didn't she—?"

"I have seen nothing of her," Washington said, stepping ashore. His aide, Colonel Alexander Hamilton, and the Marquis de Lafayette accompanied him, along with the oarsmen from the day shift. "I arrived at Robinson House to find that Arnold had left not thirty minutes earlier to prepare for my arrival here. Peggy Arnold had retired to her bed."

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"General Washington, I fear that a British attack may be under way shortly."

Before he could say more, Hamilton handed Washington a dispatch, apparently received by courier as their boat was leaving the other side. "General, you must read this at once!"

As Washington read the document his face turned ashen and he trembled with emotion. "Arnold has betrayed us!" he cried out. "Whom can we trust now?"

"I sent Molly to warn you," Swift told him. "What news is there?"

Washington read further, glancing at the message's enclosures. "The British Major André was stopped and searched by some of our irregulars near Tarrytown on Saturday. He was wearing civilian clothes and carrying an official pass in Arnold's handwriting. In his boot they found secret papers and a battle plan for an attack on West Point this morning. The handwriting matched Arnold's on the pass. After being taken into custody, André revealed his true identity as a British officer and pleaded that he was not a spy but was merely trying to return to the British lines."

The boatman named Eiger, who'd taken Swift and Molly across the Hudson the previous night, had pulled into the dock and came running up to their group. "Mr. Swift, sir," he spouted out, "I was on the river and I saw General Arnold headed downstream. He had Miss Molly with him and when I pulled near he waved two pistols and warned me away."

"He's headed for the *Vulture,*" Swift said with certainty. "And he's taken Molly as a hostage. One of the oarsmen must have spotted her waiting in the woods." He turned to Washington. "I must go after her, General. She was on a mission for me when this happened."

Washington shook his head. "If an attack may be imminent, I can spare no men."

"I'll go alone if I can have this whaleboat and crew of oarsmen. Nothing else will get me there in time."

"Take it," Washington said. "This man can row us back to Robinson House."

"Happy to do it, General," Eiger responded.

The general turned to Hamilton. "Order the immediate arrest of Joshua Smith, and have Major André brought to me at Robinson House under heavy guard. And place Major Franks and Colonel Varick under house arrest."

Within minutes, Alexander Swift was on the river, his fate and future in the hands of eight men he barely knew. Ahead lay the *Vulture,* Benedict Arnold, Molly, and a murderer.

They were nearly to Teller's Point before the sails of the *Vulture* became visible through the morning mist. Swift had raised a white flag on a stick, procured by one of the oarsmen before they

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shoved off. He prayed the British would see it before they opened fire as they had done with Arnold's boat two weeks earlier. Luck was with him. The gunboats remained silent when he approached, and a rope ladder was slung over the side as he reached the warship. He climbed on board, but the soldiers waved his boat away.

"My name is Alexander Swift," he told the British officer who met him at the top of the ladder. "I request to see General Benedict Arnold at once."

He was kept waiting under guard for a few minutes until the officer returned. "Come with me," he was told. "General Arnold will see you."

The ship was at anchor for the moment, gently swaying with the current.

Swift followed the officer belowdecks to the captain's cabin. Benedict Arnold was seated at a table there, just completing a letter. At least, Swift thought, he's had the decency to remove his uniform jacket.

He glanced up as Swift entered. "I'm sorry we must meet under such dire circumstances," Arnold addressed him, putting down his quill pen.

"Where is Molly McVey?"

"I assure you she has come to no harm. She is being held on board with my crew of oarsmen, all of whom declined to come over to the Loyalist side."

"Why did you take her?"

"She was found in the woods last night carrying a letter to General Washington. The letter implied treason on my part, and it was signed by you."

"Treason it is this day," Swift reminded him. "Release these people and throw yourself on Washington's mercy."

"It is far too late for that." He held up the letter he'd been writing. "I have just completed a letter to him. I will read you the gist of it. *On board the* Vulture, *25 September 1780. To His Excellency General Washington."* He read a lengthy paragraph regarding the unhappy contest between Great Britain and the Colonies, and then continued, *"I have no favor to ask for myself . . . but from the known humanity of your Excellency, I am induced to ask your protection for Mrs. Arnold. . . . I beg she may be permitted to return to her friends in Philadelphia, or to come to me, as she may choose."* In a postscript, he added, *"In justice to the gentlemen of my family, Colonel Varick and Major Franks, I think myself in honor bound to declare that they, as well as Joshua Smith Esq., (whom I know is suspected) are totally ignorant of any transactions of mine that they had reason to believe were injurious to the public."*

Swift had listened to the reading of the letter with a stony expression. "How does this concern me?"

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"I want you to take it back to General Washington, deliver it into his hands. Now that I am safe on board the *Vulture* I will release Molly McVey to you as well." He nodded toward the officer who had accompanied Swift, and the man disappeared into the depths of the ship.

"Major André never reached the British lines with your message," Swift told him.

"I know that. I fled when word of his arrest reached me."

"West Point is still in our hands. You have betrayed your country for nothing."

"I will fight on the British side now. We will bring down the rebellion."

The officer reappeared with Molly. Her wrists were chained in front of her. "I'm sorry, Alex," she said when she saw him. "I was caught off guard."

"Unlock her chains," Benedict Arnold said, and it was done. Then he told Swift, "You may take my letter to General Washington and leave with Miss McVey. The boat that brought you is still waiting nearby."

"There's one more thing—the six bargemen in the crew that brought you. I believe one of them has been working for you and killed the sutler Horace Flexman near West Point on Friday."

Arnold smiled slightly. "Can you name which man you suspect?"

"I believe so. Will you surrender him if I can prove his guilt?"

He considered that for a moment. "I will do so to show my good faith, in hopes that Washington will agree to Peggy's freedom."

Presently, Arnold's six bargemen were brought up in chains and Alexander Swift faced them, letting his eyes rest on each in turn as he spoke. "Jed Buckins, Samuel Fain, Jonathan Springwater, Red Heron, Onquoit, and Martin Cheever. I know you all to some extent, and I know that one of you stabbed Horace Flexman with a bayonet on Friday afternoon near Crazy Creek, and left him to die there."

The men quickly protested their innocence, all but the Indian Onquoit, who remained silent. "Get on with it," Arnold told Swift, growing impatient. "Present your proof, if you have any."

"Very well." He turned toward Arnold. "I happened upon the sutler as he was dying from his wound. I had to remove my boots and stockings to wade across Crazy Creek, as had Flexman, since his boots were dry. He lived long enough to tell me it was one of your bargemen who'd stabbed him."

"There are twelve in all," Arnold pointed out.

"But the other six would have been on duty at one in the afternoon. It had to be one of these six, probably not Springwater, since Flexman knew him by name. Probably not Onquoit either, or Flexman would have referred to him as the Indian. It was likely that the killer could be found among the remaining four: Buckins,

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Fain, Heron, or Cheever. Then, by the creek, I found a bootmark in the wet sand. It could not have been made by the victim, whose boots were dry, and I had also removed my boots. It was most likely the bootprint of the killer, who had followed Flexman to the meeting place. Why had he soaked a good pair of boots by wading across the wide but shallow creek with them on, especially since the damp boots could have been evidence against him if he was stopped on the way back? Only one likely explanation comes to mind. He knew he might leave prints in the damp soil by the creek's edge, and he couldn't risk doing that. Removing his boots and stockings and leaving a bare footprint in the wet sand would have immediately identified him. Why? Because the killer of Horace Flexman had only nine toes!"

Red Heron tried to lunge forward but the chains held him. "Sure, that's me. I told you I lost a toe to frostbite. But maybe some of the others did too!"

Swift shook his head. "I'll admit I knew nothing of the others' feet, but you did, Heron. You said you slept with them and bathed in the river with them. If even one other crewman was missing a similar toe, you could have safely crossed the creek in your bare feet. You couldn't know Flexman would live long enough to partly identify his killer, but you still couldn't risk leaving that telltale footprint."

Red Heron turned his fury on Arnold. "You can't give me over to him! I killed the sutler because he spied on your meeting with Major André!"

Arnold seemed suddenly weighed down with fatigue. "Take him," he told Swift. "Take him and the girl. But deliver my letter to Washington. He must allow Peggy her freedom."

"I'll do what I can," Swift promised and turned away. He would not shake hands with the traitor.

Major John André was tried by court-martial at Tappan on September thirtieth and sentenced to death. Washington hoped to trade the young officer to the British in exchange for Benedict Arnold, but when that failed André was hanged as a spy on October second.

Peggy Arnold was allowed to rejoin her family in Philadelphia, but public outrage at Arnold's treason ran so high that the Executive Council of Pennsylvania confiscated his estate and ordered Peggy to leave the city within two weeks. She had no choice but to join Arnold in New York City in November.

As for Arnold himself, he became an officer in the British army and that winter led a force of raiders against Richmond in the south. But that is another story. ●

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A GRIM TALE

by Will Morgan

Detective Grim surveyed the scene,
A publisher's office, neat and clean,
Except for the corpse sprawled on the floor
Definitely spoiling the room's decor.
Grim lacked a smidgen of literary taste
So one less editor seemed no great waste.
But the killing device was surely odd:
A manuscript crumpled in a wad,
Inserted in the victim's throat,
Making survival quite remote.
Though baffled, Grim did not concede.
He extracted the script for a critic to read.
"It's pathetic stuff," the expert stated,
"The man is wildly overrated.
I'd recognize his drivel any day,
His plots are all one long cliché."
So the perp's own style
Hauled him to trial,
To be met by a Judge with a taunting sneer,
"Your fall from grace has landed you here."
"*Au contraire,* Your Honor," was the perp's retort.
"Not a fall, just a *slip*—the rejection sort."

Poem©1999 by Will Morgan

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Art by Allen Davis

DEATH BY EROS

by Steven Saylor

"The Neapolitans are different from us Romans," I remarked to Eco as we strolled across the central forum of Neapolis. "A man can almost feel that he's left Italy altogether and been magically transported to a seaport in Greece. Greek colonists founded the city hundreds of years ago, taking advantage of the extraordinary bay, which they called the *Krater,* or Cup. The locals still have Greek names, eat Greek food, follow Greek customs. Many of them don't even speak Latin."

Eco pointed to his lips and made a self-deprecating gesture to say, *Neither do I!* At fifteen, he tended to make a joke of everything, including his muteness.

"Ah, but you can *hear* Latin," I said, flicking a finger against one of his ears just hard enough to sting, "and sometimes even understand it."

We had arrived in Neapolis on our way back to Rome, after doing a bit of business for Cicero down in Sicily. Rather than stay at an inn, I was hoping to find accommodations with a wealthy Greek trader named Sosistrides. "The fellow owes me a favor," Cicero had

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told me. "Look him up and mention my name, and I'm sure he'll put you up for the night."

With a few directions from the locals (who were polite enough not to laugh at my Greek) we found the trader's house. The columns and lintels and decorative details of the facade were stained in various shades of pale red, blue, and yellow that seemed to glow under the warm sunlight. Incongruous amid the play of colors was a black wreath on the door.

"What do you think, Eco? Can we ask a friend of a friend, a total stranger really, to put us up when the household is in mourning? It seems presumptuous."

Eco nodded thoughtfully, then gestured to the wreath and expressed curiosity with a flourish of his wrist. I nodded. "I see your point. If it's Sosistrides who's died, or a member of the family, Cicero would want us to deliver his condolences, wouldn't he? And we must learn the details, so that we can inform him in a letter. I think we must at least rouse the doorkeeper, to see what's happened."

I walked to the door and politely knocked with the side of my foot. There was no answer. I knocked again and waited. I was about to rap on the door with my knuckles, rudely or not, when it swung open.

The man who stared back at us was dressed in mourning black. He was not a slave; I glanced at his hand and saw a citizen's iron ring. His graying hair was disheveled and his face distressed. His eyes were red from weeping.

"What do you want?" he said, in a voice more wary than unkind.

"Forgive me, citizen. My name is Gordianus. This is my son, Eco. Eco hears but is mute, so I shall speak for him. We're travelers, on our way home to Rome. I'm a friend of Marcus Tullius Cicero. It was he who—"

"Cicero? Ah, yes, the Roman administrator down in Sicily, the one who can actually read and write, for a change." The man wrinkled his brow. "Has he sent a message, or . . . ?"

"Nothing urgent; Cicero asked me only to remind you of his friendship. You are, I take it, the master of the house, Sosistrides?"

"Yes. And you? I'm sorry, did you already introduce yourself? My mind wanders . . ." He looked over his shoulder. Beyond him, in the vestibule, I glimpsed a funeral bier strewn

"The inspiration for 'Death by Eros' can be found in the 23rd Idyll of the poet Theocritus, which gives the gist of the story, though as a moral fable rather than a mystery," Steven Saylor told *EQMM*—and in his hands the mystery acquires a surprising twist! The latest Gordianus novel, *Rubicon*, has just been released (St. Martin's Press).

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with freshly cut flowers and laurel leaves.

"My name is Gordianus. And this is my son—"

"Gordianus, did you say?"

"Yes."

"Cicero mentioned you once. Something about a murder trial up in Rome. You helped him. They call you the Finder."

"Yes."

He looked at me intently for a long moment. "Come in, Finder. I want you to see him."

The bier in the vestibule was propped up and tilted at an angle so that its occupant could be clearly seen. The corpse was that of a youth probably not much older than Eco. His arms were crossed over his chest and he was clothed in a long white gown, so that only his face and hands were exposed. His hair was boyishly long and as yellow as a field of millet in summer, crowned with a laurel wreath of the sort awarded to athletic champions. The flesh of his delicately molded features was waxy and pale, but even in death his beauty was remarkable.

"His eyes were blue," said Sosistrides in a low voice. "They're closed now, you can't see them, but they were blue, like his dear, dead mother's; he got his looks from her. The purest blue you ever saw, like the color of the Cup on a clear day. When we pulled him from the pool, they were all bloodshot. . . ."

"This is your son, Sosistrides?"

He stifled a sob. "My only son, Cleon."

"A terrible loss."

He nodded, unable to speak. Eco shifted nervously from foot to foot, studying the dead boy with furtive glances, almost shyly.

"They call you Finder," Sosistrides finally said, in a hoarse voice. "Help me find the monster who killed my son."

I looked at the dead youth and felt a deep empathy for Sosistrides' suffering, and not merely because I myself had a son of similar age. (Eco may be adopted, but I love him as my own flesh.) I was stirred also by the loss of such beauty. Why does the death of a beautiful stranger affect us more deeply than the loss of someone plain? Why should it be so, that if a vase of exquisite workmanship but little practical value should break, we feel the loss more sharply than if we break an ugly vessel we use every day? The gods made men to love beauty above all else, perhaps because they themselves are beautiful and wish for us to love them, even when they do us harm.

"How did he die, Sosistrides?"

"It was at the gymnasium, yesterday. There was a city-wide contest among the boys—discus throwing, wrestling, racing. I couldn't attend. I was away in Pompeii on business all day. . . ." Sosistrides again fought back tears. He reached out and touched

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the wreath on his son's brow. "Cleon took the laurel crown. He was a splendid athlete. He always won at everything, but they say he outdid himself yesterday. If only I had been there to see it! Afterwards, while the other boys retired to the baths inside, Cleon took a swim in the long pool, alone. There was no one else in the courtyard. No one saw it happen. . . ."

"The boy drowned, Sosistrides?" It seemed unlikely, if the boy had been as good at swimming as he was at everything else.

Sosistrides shook his head and shut his eyes tight, squeezing tears from them. "The gymnasiarchus is an old wrestler named Caputorus. It was he who found Cleon. He heard a splash, he said, but thought nothing of it. Later he went into the courtyard and discovered Cleon. The water was red with blood. Cleon was at the bottom of the pool. Beside him was a broken statue. It must have struck the back of his head; it left a terrible gash."

"A statue?"

"Of Eros—the god you Romans call Cupid. A cherub with bow and arrows, a decoration at the edge of the pool. Not a large statue, but heavy, made of solid marble. It somehow fell from its pedestal as Cleon was passing below. . . ." He gazed at the boy's bloodless face, lost in misery.

I sensed the presence of another in the room and turned to see a young woman in a black gown with a black mantle over her head. She walked to Sosistrides' side. "Who are these visitors, Father?"

"Friends of the provincial administrator down in Sicily—Gordianus of Rome, and his son, Eco. This is my daughter, Cleio. Daughter! Cover yourself!" Sosistrides' sudden embarrassment was caused by the fact that Cleio had pushed the mantle from her head, revealing that her dark hair was crudely shorn, cut so short that it didn't reach her shoulders. No longer shadowed by the mantle, her face, too, showed signs of unbridled mourning. Long scratches ran down her cheeks, and there were bruises where she appeared to have struck herself, marring a beauty that rivaled her brother's.

"I mourn for the loss of the one I loved best in all the world," she said in a hollow voice. "I feel no shame to show it." She cast an icy stare at me and then at Eco, then swept from the room.

Extreme displays of grief are disdained in Rome, where excessive public mourning is banned by law, but we were in Neapolis. Sosistrides seemed to read my thoughts. "Cleio has always been more Greek than Roman. She lets her emotions run wild. Just the opposite of her brother. Cleon was always so cool, so detached." He shook his head. "She's taken her brother's death very hard. When I came home from Pompeii yesterday I found his body here in the vestibule; his slaves had carried him home from the gymnasium. Cleio was in her room, crying uncontrollably. She'd already cut her hair. She wept and wailed all night long."

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He gazed at his dead son's face and reached out to touch it, his hand looking warm and ruddy against the unnatural pallor of the boy's cold cheek. "Someone murdered my son. You must help me find out who did it, Gordianus—to put the shade of my son to rest, and for my grieving daughter's sake."

"That's right, I heard the splash. I was here behind my counter in the changing room, and the door to the courtyard was standing wide open, just like it is now."

Caputorus the gymnasiarchus was a grizzled old wrestler with enormous shoulders, a perfectly bald head, and a protruding belly. His eyes kept darting past me to follow the comings and goings of the naked youths, and every so often he interrupted me in mid-sentence to yell out a greeting which usually included some jocular insult or obscenity. The fourth time he reached out to tousle Eco's hair, Eco deftly moved out of range and stayed there.

"And when you heard the splash, did you immediately go and have a look?" I asked.

"Not right away. To tell you the truth, I didn't think much of it. I figured Cleon was out there jumping in and out of the pool, which is against the rules, mind you! It's a long, shallow pool meant for swimming only, and no jumping allowed. But he was always breaking the rules. Thought he could get away with anything."

"So why didn't you go out and tell him to stop? You are the gymnasiarchus, aren't you?"

"Do you think that counted for anything with that spoiled brat? Master of the gym I may be, but nobody was his master. You know what he'd have done? Quoted some fancy lines from some famous play, most likely about old wrestlers with big bellies, flashed his naked behind at me, and then jumped back in the pool! I don't need the grief, thank you very much. Hey, Manius!" Caputorus shouted at a youth behind me. "I saw you and your sweetheart out there wrestling this morning. You been studying your old man's dirty vases to learn those positions? Ha!"

Over my shoulder I saw a redheaded youth flash a lascivious grin and make an obscene gesture using both hands.

"Back to yesterday," I said. "You heard the splash and didn't think much of it, but eventually you went out to the courtyard."

"Just to get some fresh air. I noticed right away that Cleon wasn't swimming anymore. I figured he'd headed inside to the baths."

"But wouldn't he have passed you on the way?"

"Not necessarily. There are two passageways into the courtyard. The one most people take goes past my counter here. The other is through a little hallway that connects to the outer vestibule. It's a more roundabout route to get inside to the baths, but he could have gone in that way."

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"And could someone have gotten into the courtyard the same way?"

"Yes."

"Then you can't say for certain that Cleon was alone out there."

"You are a sharp one, aren't you!" Caputorus said sarcastically. "But you're right. Cleon was out there by himself to start with, of that I'm sure. And after that, nobody walked by me, coming or going. But somebody could have come and gone by the other passageway. Anyway, when I stepped out there, I could tell right away that something was wrong, seriously wrong, though I couldn't quite say what. Only later, I realized what it was: The statue was missing, that little statue of Eros that's been there since before I took over running this place. You know how you can see a thing every day and take it for granted, and when all of a sudden it's not there, you can't even say what's missing, but you *sense* that something's off? That's how it was. Then I saw the color of the water. All pinkish in one spot, and darker toward the bottom. I stepped closer and then I saw him, lying on the bottom, not moving and no air bubbles coming up, and the statue around him in pieces. It was obvious right away what must have happened. Here, I'll show you the spot."

As we were passing out the doorway a muscular wrestler wearing only a leather headband and wrist-wraps squeezed by on his way in. Caputorus twisted a towel between his fists and snapped it against the youth's bare backside. "Your mother!" yelled the stung athlete.

"No, your shiny red bottom!" said Caputorus, who threw back his head and laughed.

The pool had been drained and scrubbed, leaving no trace of Cleon's blood amid the puddles. The pieces of the statue of Eros had been gathered up and deposited next to the empty pedestal. One of the cherub's tiny feet had broken off, as had the top of Eros's bow, the point of his notched arrow, and the feathery tip of one wing.

"The statue had been here for years, you say?"

"That's right."

"Sitting here on this pedestal?"

"Yes. Never budged, even when we'd get a bit of a rumble from Vesuvius."

"Strange, then, that it should have fallen yesterday, when no one felt any tremors. Even stranger that it should fall directly onto a swimmer. . . ."

"It's a mystery, all right."

"I think the word is murder."

Caputorus looked at me shrewdly. "Not necessarily."

"What do you mean?"

"Ask some of the boys. See what they tell you."

"I intend to ask everyone who was here what they saw or heard."

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"Then you might start with this little fellow." He indicated the broken Eros.

"Speak plainly, Caputorus."

"Others know more than I do. All I can tell you is what I've picked up from the boys."

"And what's that?"

"Cleon was a heartbreaker. You've only seen him laid out for his funeral. You have no idea how good-looking he was, both above the neck and below. A body like a statue by Phidias, a regular Apollo—he took your breath away! Smart, too, and the best athlete on the Cup. Strutting around here naked every day, challenging all the boys to wrestle him, celebrating his wins by quoting Homer. He had half the boys in this place trailing after him, all wanting to be his special friend. They were awestruck by him."

"And yet, yesterday, after he won the laurel crown, he swam alone."

"Maybe because they'd all finally had enough of him. Maybe they got tired of his bragging. Maybe they realized he wasn't the sort ever to return a shred of love or affection to anybody."

"You sound bitter, Caputorus."

"Do I?"

"Are you sure you're talking just about the boys?"

His face reddened. He worked his jaw back and forth and flexed his massive shoulders. I tried not to flinch.

"I'm no fool, Finder," he finally said, lowering his voice. "I've been around long enough to learn a few things. Lesson one: A boy like Cleon is nothing but trouble. Look, but don't touch." His jaw relaxed into a faint smile. "I've got a tough hide. I tease and joke with the best, but none of these boys gets under my skin."

"Not even Cleon?"

His face hardened, then broke into a grin as he looked beyond me. "Calpurnius!" he yelled at a boy across the courtyard. "That's no way to handle your javelin! Merciful Zeus, let me show you how."

Caputorus pushed past me, tousling Eco's hair on his way, leaving us to ponder the broken Eros and the empty pool where Cleon had died.

I managed that day to speak to every boy in the gymnasium. Most of them had been there the previous day, either to take part in the athletic games or to watch. Most of them were cooperative, but only to a point. I had the feeling that they had already talked among themselves and decided as a group to say as little as possible concerning Cleon's death to outsiders like myself, no matter that I came as the representative of Cleon's father.

Nevertheless, from uncomfortable looks, wistful sighs, and unfinished sentences I gathered that what Caputorus had told me

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was true: Cleon had broken hearts all over the gymnasium, and in the process had made more than a few enemies. He was by universal consensus the brightest and most beautiful boy in the group, and yesterday's games had proven conclusively that he was the best athlete as well. He was also vain, arrogant, selfish, and aloof; easy to fall in love with and incapable of loving in return. The boys who had not fallen under his personal spell at one time or another disliked him out of pure envy.

All this I managed to learn as much from what was left unsaid as from what each boy said, but when it came to obtaining more concrete details I struck a wall of silence. Had anyone ever been heard uttering a serious threat to Cleon? Had anyone ever said anything, even in jest, about the potentially hazardous placement of the statue of Eros beside the pool? Were any of the boys especially upset about Cleon's victories that day? Had any of them slipped away from the baths at the time Cleon was killed? And what of the gymnasiarchus? Had Caputorus's behavior toward Cleon always been above reproach, as he claimed?

To these questions, no matter how directly or indirectly I posed them, I received no clear answers, only a series of equivocations and evasions.

I was beginning to despair of uncovering anything significant when finally I interviewed Hippolytus, the wrestler whose backside Caputorus had playfully snapped with his towel. He was preparing for a plunge in the hot pool when I came to him. He untied his leather headband, letting a shock of jet-black hair fall into his eyes, and began to unwrap his wrists. Eco seemed a bit awed by the fellow's brawniness; to me, with his babyish face and apple-red cheeks, Hippolytus seemed a hugely overgrown child.

I had gathered from the others that Hippolytus was close, or as close as anyone, to Cleon. I began the conversation by saying as much, hoping to catch him off his guard. He looked at me, unfazed, and nodded.

"I suppose that's right. I liked him. He wasn't as bad as some made out."

"What do you mean?"

"Wasn't Cleon's fault if everybody swooned over him. Wasn't his fault if he didn't swoon back. I don't think he had it in him to feel that way about another boy." He frowned and wrinkled his brow. "Some say that's not natural, but there you are. The gods make us all different."

"I'm told he was arrogant and vain."

"Wasn't his fault he was better than everybody else at wrestling and running and throwing. Wasn't his fault he was smarter than his tutors. But he shouldn't have crowed so much, I suppose. Hubris—you know what that is?"

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"Vanity that offends the gods," I said.

"Right, like in the plays. Acquiring a swollen head, becoming too cocksure, until a fellow's just begging to be struck down by a lightning bolt or swallowed by an earthquake. What the gods give, they can take away. They gave Cleon everything. Then they took it all away."

"The gods?"

Hippolytus sighed. "Cleon deserved to be brought down a notch, but he didn't deserve that punishment."

"Punishment? From whom? For what?"

I watched his eyes and saw the to and fro of some internal debate. If I prodded too hard, he might shut up tight; if I prodded not at all, he might keep answering in pious generalities. I started to speak, then saw something settle inside him, and held my tongue.

"You've seen the statue that fell on him?" Hippolytus said.

"Yes. Eros with his bow and arrows."

"Do you think that was just a coincidence?"

"I don't understand."

"You've talked to everyone in the gymnasium, and nobody's told you? They're all thinking it; they're just too superstitious to say it aloud. It was Eros that killed Cleon, for spurning him."

"You think the god himself did it? Using his own statue?"

"Love flowed to Cleon from all directions, like rivers to the sea—but he turned back the rivers and lived in his own rocky desert. Eros chose Cleon to be his favorite, but Cleon refused him. He laughed in the god's face once too often."

"How? What had Cleon done to finally push the god too far?"

Again I saw the internal debate behind his eyes. Clearly, he wanted to tell me everything. I had only to be patient. At last he sighed and spoke. "Lately, some of us thought that Cleon might finally be softening. He had a new tutor, a young philosopher named Mulciber who came from Alexandria about six months ago. Cleon and his sister Cleio went to Mulciber's little house off the forum every morning to talk about Plato and read poetry."

"Cleio as well?"

"Sosistrides believed in educating both his children, no matter that Cleio's a girl. Anyway, pretty soon word got around that Mulciber was courting Cleon. Why not? He was smitten, like everybody else. The surprise was that Cleon seemed to respond to his advances. Mulciber would send him chaste little love poems, and Cleon would send poems back to him. Cleon actually showed me some of Mulciber's poems, and asked me to read the ones he was sending back. They were beautiful! He was good at that, too, of course." Hippolytus shook his head ruefully.

"But it was all a cruel hoax. Cleon was just leading Mulciber on, making a fool of him. Only the day before yesterday, right in front

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of some of Mulciber's other students, Cleon made a public show of returning all the poems Mulciber had sent him and asking for his own poems back. He said he'd written them merely as exercises, to teach his own tutor the proper way to write a love poem. Mulciber was dumbstruck! Everyone in the gymnasium heard about it. People said Cleon had finally gone too far. To have spurned his tutor's advances was one thing, but to do so in such a cruel, deliberately humiliating manner—that was hubris, people said, and the gods would take vengeance. And now they have."

I nodded. "But quite often the gods use human vessels to achieve their ends. Do you really think the statue tumbled into the pool of its own accord, without a hand to push it?"

Hippolytus frowned and seemed to debate revealing yet another secret. "Yesterday, not long before Cleon drowned, some of us saw a stranger in the gymnasium."

At last, I thought, a concrete bit of evidence, something solid to grapple with! I took a deep breath. "No one else mentioned seeing a stranger."

"I told you, they're all too superstitious. If the boy we saw was some emissary of the god, they don't want to speak of it."

"A boy?"

"Perhaps it was Eros himself, in human form—though you'd think a god would be better groomed and wear clothes that fit!"

"You saw this stranger clearly?"

"Not that clearly; neither did anybody else, as far as I can tell. I only caught a glimpse of him loitering in the outer vestibule, but I could tell he wasn't one of the regular boys."

"How so?"

"By the fact that he was dressed at all. This was just after the games, and everyone was still naked. And most of the gymnasium crowd are pretty well-off; this fellow had a wretched haircut and his tunic looked like a patched hand-me-down from a big brother. I figured he was some stranger who wandered in off the street, or maybe a messenger slave too shy to come into the changing room."

"And his face?"

Hippolytus shook his head. "I didn't see his face. He had dark hair, though."

"Did you speak to him, or hear him speak?"

"No. I headed for the hot plunge and forgot all about him. Then Caputorus found Cleon's body, and everything was crazy after that. I didn't make any connection to the stranger until this morning, when I found out that some of the others had seen him, too."

"Did anybody see this young stranger pass through the baths and the changing room?"

"I don't think so. But there's another way to get from the outer vestibule to the inner courtyard, through a little passage-

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way at the far end of the building."

"So Caputorus told me. It seems possible, then, that this stranger could have entered the outer vestibule, sneaked through the empty passage, come upon Cleon alone in the pool, pushed the statue onto him, then fled the way he had come, all without being clearly seen by anyone."

Hippolytus took a deep breath. "That's how I figure it. So you see, it must have been the god, or some agent of the god. Who else could have had such perfect timing, to carry out such an awful deed?"

I shook my head. "I can see you know a bit about poetry and more than a bit about wrestling holds, young man, but has no one tutored you in logic? We may have answered the question of *how*, but that hasn't answered the question of *who*. I respect your religious conviction that the god Eros may have had the motive and the will to kill Cleon in such a cold-blooded fashion—but it seems there were plenty of mortals with abundant motive as well. In my line of work I prefer to suspect the most likely mortal first, and presume divine causation only as a last resort. Chief among such suspects must be this tutor, Mulciber. Could he have been the stranger you saw lurking in the vestibule? Philosophers are notorious for having bad haircuts and shabby clothes."

"No. The stranger was shorter and had darker hair."

"Still, I should like to have a talk with this lovesick tutor."

"You can't," said Hippolytus. "Mulciber hanged himself yesterday."

"No wonder such a superstitious dread surrounds Cleon's death," I remarked to Eco, as we made our way to the house of Mulciber. "The golden boy of the Cup, killed by a statue of Eros; his spurned tutor hanging himself the same day. This is the dark side of Eros. It casts a shadow that frightens everyone into silence."

Except me, Eco gestured, and let out the stifled, inchoate grunt he sometimes emits simply to declare his existence. I smiled at his self-deprecating humor, but it seemed to me that the things we had learned that morning had disturbed and unsettled Eco. He was at an age to be acutely aware of his place in the scheme of things, and to begin wondering who might ever love him, especially in spite of his handicap. It seemed unfair that a boy like Cleon, who had only scorn for his suitors, should have inspired so much unrequited infatuation and desire, when others faced lives of loneliness. Did the gods engineer the paradox of love's unfairness to amuse themselves, or was it one of the evils that escaped from Pandora's box to plague mankind?

The door of the philosopher's house, like that of Sosistrides, was adorned with a black wreath. Following my knock, an elderly slave opened it to admit us to a little foyer where a body was laid out upon a bier much less elaborate than that of Cleon. I saw at

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once why Hippolytus had been certain that the short, dark-haired stranger at the gymnasium had not been the Alexandrian tutor, for Mulciber was quite tall and had fair hair. He had been a reasonably handsome man of thirty-five or so, about my own age. Eco gestured to the scarf that had been clumsily gathered about the dead man's throat, and then clutched his own neck with a strangler's grip: *To hide the rope marks,* he seemed to say.

"Did you know my master?" asked the slave who had shown us in.

"Only by reputation," I said. "We're visitors to Neapolis, but I've heard of your master's devotion to poetry and philosophy. I was shocked to learn of his sudden death." I spoke only the truth, after all.

The slave nodded. "He was a man of learning and talent. Still, few have come to pay their respects. He had no family here. And of course there are many who won't set foot inside the house of a suicide, for fear of bad luck."

"It's certain that he killed himself, then?"

"It was I who found him, hanging from a rope. He tied it to that beam, just above the boy's head." Eco rolled his eyes up. "Then he stood on a chair, put the noose around his neck, and kicked the chair out of the way. His neck snapped. I like to think he died quickly." The slave regarded his master's face affectionately. "Such a waste! And all for the love of that worthless boy!"

"You're certain that's why he killed himself?"

"Why else? He was making a good living here in Neapolis, enough to send a bit back to his brother in Alexandria every now and again, and even to think of purchasing a second slave. I'm not sure how I'd have taken to that; I've been with him since he was a boy. I used to carry his wax tablets and scrolls for him when he was little and had his own tutor. No, his life was going well in every way, except for that horrible boy!"

"You know that Cleon died yesterday."

"Oh, yes. That's why the master killed himself."

"He hanged himself *after* hearing of Cleon's death?"

"Of course! Only . . ." The old man looked puzzled, as if he had not previously considered any other possibility. "Now let me think. Yesterday was strange all around, you see. The master sent me out early in the morning, before daybreak, with specific instructions not to return until evening. That was very odd, because usually I spend all day here, admitting his pupils and seeing to his meals. But yesterday he sent me out, and I stayed away until dusk. I heard about Cleon's death on my way home. When I came in, there was the master, hanging from that rope."

"Then you don't know for certain when he died—only that it must have been between daybreak and nightfall."

"I suppose you're right."

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"Who might have seen him during the day?"

"Usually pupils come and go all day, but not so yesterday, on account of the games at the gymnasium. All his regular students took part, you see, or else went to watch. The master had planned to be a spectator himself. So he had canceled all his regular classes, you see, except for his very first of the day—and that he'd never cancel, of course, because it was with that wretched boy!"

"Cleon, you mean."

"Yes, Cleon and his sister Cleio. They always came for the first hour of the day. This month they were reading Plato on the death of Socrates."

"Suicide was on Mulciber's mind, then. And yesterday, did Cleon and his sister arrive for their class?"

"I can't say. I suppose they did. I was out of the house by then."

"I shall have to ask Cleio, but for now we'll assume they did. Perhaps Mulciber was hoping to patch things up with Cleon." The slave gave me a curious look. "I know about the humiliating episode of the returned poems the day before," I explained.

The slave regarded me warily. "You seem to know a great deal for a man who's not from Neapolis. What are you doing here?"

"Only trying to discover the truth. Now then: We'll assume that Cleon and Cleio came for their class, early in the morning. Perhaps Mulciber was braced for another humiliation, and even then planning suicide—or was he wildly hoping, with a lover's blind faith, for some impossible reconciliation? Perhaps that's why he dismissed you for the day, because he didn't care to have his old slave witness either outcome. But it must have gone badly, or at least not as Mulciber hoped, for he never showed up to watch the games at the gymnasium that day. Everyone seems to assume that it was news of Cleon's death that drove him to suicide, but it seems to me just as likely that Mulciber hanged himself right after Cleon and Cleio left, unable to bear yet another rejection."

Eco, greatly agitated, mimed an athlete throwing a discus, then a man fitting a noose around his neck, then an archer notching an arrow in a bow.

I nodded. "Yes, bitter irony: Even as Cleon was enjoying his greatest triumph at the gymnasium, poor Mulciber may have been snuffing out his own existence. And then, Cleon's death in the pool. No wonder everyone thinks that Eros himself brought Cleon down." I studied the face of the dead man. "Your master was a poet, wasn't he?"

"Yes," said the slave. "He wrote at least a few lines every day of his life."

"Did he leave a farewell poem?"

The slave shook his head. "You'd think he might have, if only to say goodbye to me after all these years."

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"But there was nothing? Not even a note?"

"Not a line. And that's another strange thing, because the night before he was up long after midnight, writing and writing. I thought perhaps he'd put the boy behind him and thrown himself into composing some epic poem, seized by the muse! But I can't find any trace of it. Whatever he was writing so frantically, it seems to have vanished. Perhaps, when he made up his mind to hang himself, he thought better of what he'd written, and burned it. He seems to have gotten rid of some other papers, as well."

"What papers?"

"The love poems he'd written to Cleon, the ones Cleon returned to him—they've vanished. I suppose the master was embarrassed at the thought of anyone reading them after he was gone, and so he got rid of them. So perhaps it's not so strange after all that he left no farewell note."

I nodded vaguely, but it still seemed odd to me. From what I knew of poets, suicides, and unrequited lovers, Mulciber would almost certainly have left some words behind—to chastise Cleon, to elicit pity, to vindicate himself. But the silent corpse of the tutor offered no explanation.

As the day was waning, I at last returned to the house of Sosistrides, footsore and soul-weary. A slave admitted us. I paused to gaze for a long moment at the lifeless face of Cleon. Nothing had changed, and yet he did not look as beautiful to my eyes as he had before.

Sosistrides called us into his study. "How did it go, Finder?"

"I've had a productive day, if not a pleasant one. I talked to everyone I could find at the gymnasium. I also went to the house of your children's tutor. You do know that Mulciber hanged himself yesterday?"

"Yes. I found out only today, after I spoke to you. I knew he was a bit infatuated with Cleon, wrote poems to him and such, but I had no idea he was so passionately in love with him. Another tragedy, like ripples in a pond." Sosistrides, too, seemed to assume without question that the tutor's suicide followed upon news of Cleon's death. "And what did you find? Did you discover anything . . . significant?"

I nodded. "I think I know who killed your son."

His face assumed an expression of strangely mingled relief and dismay. "Tell me, then!"

"Would you send for your daughter first? Before I can be certain, there are a few questions I need to ask her. And when I think of the depth of her grief, it seems to me that she, too, should hear what I have to say."

He called for a slave to fetch the girl from her room. "You're right, of course; Cleio should be here, in spite of her . . . unseemly appear-

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ance. Her grieving shows her to be a woman, after all, but I've raised her almost as a son, you know. I made sure she learned to read and write. I sent her to the same tutors as Cleon. Of late she's been reading Plato with him, both of them studying with Mulciber. . . ."

"Yes, I know."

Cleio entered the room, her mantle pushed defiantly back from her shorn head. Her cheeks were lined with fresh, livid scratches, signs that her mourning had continued unabated through the day.

"The Finder thinks he knows who killed Cleon," Sosistrides explained.

"Yes, but I need to ask you a few questions first," I said. "Are you well enough to talk?"

She nodded.

"Is it true that you and your brother went to your regular morning class with Mulciber yesterday?"

"Yes." She averted her tear-reddened eyes and spoke in a hoarse whisper.

"When you arrived at his house, was Mulciber there?"

She paused. "Yes."

"Was it he who let you in the door?"

Again a pause. "No."

"But his slave was out of the house, gone for the day. Who let you in?"

"The door was unlocked . . . ajar . . ."

"So you and Cleon simply stepped inside?"

"Yes."

"Were harsh words exchanged between your brother and Mulciber?"

Her breath became ragged. "No."

"Are you sure? Only the day before, your brother had publicly rejected and humiliated Mulciber. He returned his love poems and ridiculed them in front of others. That must have been a tremendous blow to Mulciber. Isn't it true that when the two of you showed up at his house yesterday morning Mulciber lost his temper with Cleon?"

She shook her head.

"What if I suggest that Mulciber became hysterical? That he ranted against your brother? That he threatened to kill him?"

"No! That never happened. Mulciber was too—he would never have done such a thing!"

"But I suggest that he did. I suggest that yesterday, after suffering your brother's deceit and abuse, Mulciber reached the end of his tether. He snapped, like a rein that's worn clean through, and his passions ran away with him like maddened horses. By the time you and your brother left his house, Mulciber must have been raving like a madman—"

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"No! He wasn't! He was—"

"And after you left, he brooded. He took out the love poems into which he had poured his heart and soul, the very poems that Cleon returned to him so scornfully the day before. They had once been beautiful to him, but now they were vile, so he burned them."

"Never!"

"He had planned to attend the games at the gymnasium, to cheer Cleon on, but instead he waited until the contests were over, then sneaked into the vestibule, skulking like a thief. He came upon Cleon alone in the pool. He saw the statue of Eros—a bitter reminder of his own rejected love. No one else was about, and there was Cleon, swimming facedown, not even aware that anyone else was in the courtyard, unsuspecting and helpless. Mulciber couldn't resist—he waited until the very moment that Cleon passed beneath the statue, then pushed it from its pedestal. The statue struck Cleon's head. Cleon sank to the bottom and drowned."

Cleio wept and shook her head. "No, no! It wasn't Mulciber!"

"Oh, yes! And then, wracked with despair at having killed the boy he loved, Mulciber rushed home and hanged himself. He didn't even bother to write a note to justify himself or beg forgiveness for the murder. He'd fancied himself a poet, but what greater failure is there for a poet than to have his love poems rejected? And so he hanged himself without writing another line, and he'll go to his funeral pyre in silence, a common murderer—"

"No, no, no!" Cleio clutched her cheeks, tore at her hair, and wailed. Eco, whom I had told to be prepared for such an outburst, started back nonetheless. Sosistrides looked at me aghast. I averted my eyes. How could I have simply told him the truth and made him believe it? He had to be shown. Cleio had to show him.

"He *did* leave a farewell," Cleio cried. "It was the most beautiful poem he ever wrote!"

"But his slave found nothing. Mulciber's poems to Cleon had vanished, and there was nothing new—"

"Because I took them!"

"Where are they, then?"

She reached into the bosom of her black gown and pulled out two handfuls of crumpled papyrus. "These were his poems to Cleon! You never saw such beautiful poems, such pure, sweet love put down in words! Cleon made fun of them, but they broke my heart! And here is his farewell poem, the one he left lying on his threshold so that Cleon would be sure to see it when we went to his house yesterday and found him hanging in the foyer, his neck broken, his body soiled . . . dead . . . gone from me forever!"

She pressed a scrap of papyrus into my hands. It was in Greek, the letters rendered in a florid, desperate hand. A phrase near the middle caught my eye:

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One day, even your beauty will fade;
One day, even you may love unrequited!
Take pity, then, and favor my corpse
With a first, final, farewell kiss . . .

She snatched back the papyrus and clutched it to her bosom. My voice was hollow in my ears. "When you went to Mulciber's house yesterday, you and Cleon found him already dead."

"Yes!"

"And you wept."

"Because I loved him!"

"Even though he didn't love you?"

"Mulciber loved Cleon. He couldn't help himself."

"Did Cleon weep?"

Her face became so contorted with hatred that I heard Sosistrides gasp in horror. "Oh no," she said, "he didn't weep. Cleon laughed! He laughed! He shook his head and said, 'What a fool,' and walked out the door. I screamed at him to come back, to help me cut him down, and he only said, 'I'll be late for the games!'"

Cleio collapsed to the floor, weeping, the poems scattering around her. "'Late for the games!'" she repeated, as if it were her brother's epitaph.

On the long ride back to Rome through the Campanian countryside, Eco's hands grew weary and I grew hoarse debating whether I had done the right thing. Eco argued that I should have kept my suspicions of Cleio to myself. I argued that Sosistrides deserved to know what his daughter had done, and how and why his son had died—and needed to be shown, as well, how deeply and callously his beautiful, beloved Cleon had inflicted misery on others.

"Besides," I said, "when we returned to Sosistrides' house, I wasn't certain myself that Cleio had murdered Cleon. Accusing the dead tutor was a way of flushing her out. Her possession of Mulciber's missing poems was the only tangible evidence that events had unfolded as I suspected. I tried in vain to think of some way, short of housebreaking, to search her room without either Cleio or her father knowing — but as it turned out, such a search would have found nothing. I should have known that she would keep the poems on her person, next to her heart! She was as madly, hopelessly in love with Mulciber as he was in love with Cleon. Eros can be terribly careless when he scatters his arrows!"

We also debated the degree and nature of Cleon's perfidy. When he saw Mulciber's dead body, was Cleon so stunned by the enormity of what he had done—driven a lovesick man to suicide—that he went about his business in a sort of stupor, attending the games and performing his athletic feats like an automaton? Or was he so cold

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that he felt nothing? Or, as Eco argued in an extremely convoluted series of gestures, did Mulciber's fatal demonstration of lovesick devotion actually stimulate Cleon in some perverse way, inflating his ego and inspiring him to excel as never before at the games?

Whatever his private thoughts, instead of grieving, Cleon blithely went off and won his laurel crown, leaving Mulciber to spin in midair and Cleio to plot her vengeance. In a fit of grief, she cut off her hair. The sight of her reflection in Mulciber's atrium pool gave her the idea to pass as a boy; an ill-fitting tunic from the tutor's wardrobe completed her disguise. She carried a knife with her to the gymnasium, the same one she had used to cut her hair, and was prepared to stab her brother in front of his friends. But it turned out that she didn't need the knife. By chance—or guided by Eros—she found her way into the courtyard, where the statue presented itself as the perfect murder weapon.

As far as Cleio was concerned, the statue's role in the crime constituted proof that she acted not only with the god's approval but as an instrument of his will. This pious argument had so far, at least as of our leaving Neapolis, stayed Sosistrides from punishing her. I did not envy the poor merchant. With his wife and son dead, could he bear to snuff out the life of his only remaining offspring, even for so great a crime? And yet, how could he bear to let her live, knowing she had murdered his beloved son? Such a conundrum would test the wisdom of Athena!

Eco and I debated, too, the merits of Mulciber's poetry. I had begged of Sosistrides a copy of the tutor's farewell, so that I could ponder it at my leisure:

> Savage, sullen boy, whelp of a lioness,
> Stone-hearted and scornful of love,
> I give you a lover's ring—my noose!
> No longer be sickened by the sight of me;
> I go to the only place that offers solace
> To the broken-hearted: oblivion!
> But will you not stop and weep for me,
> If only for one moment . . .

The poem continued for many more lines, veering between recrimination, self-pity, and surrender to the annihilating power of love.

Hopelessly sentimental! More cloying than honey! The very worst sort of dreck, pronounced Eco, with a series of gestures so sweeping that he nearly fell from his horse. I merely nodded, and wondered if my son would feel the same in another year or so, after Eros had wounded him with a stray arrow or two and given him a clearer notion, from personal experience, of just how deeply the god of love can pierce the hearts of helpless mortals. ●

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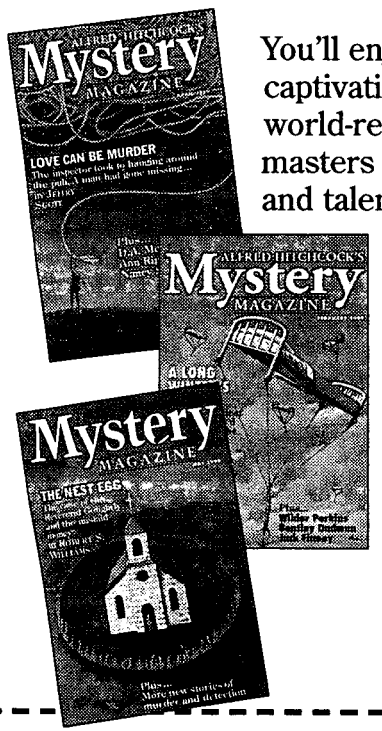

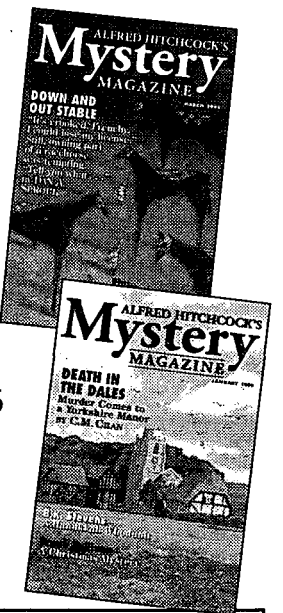

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TECHNOLOGY UPDATE

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by Anne Regalia

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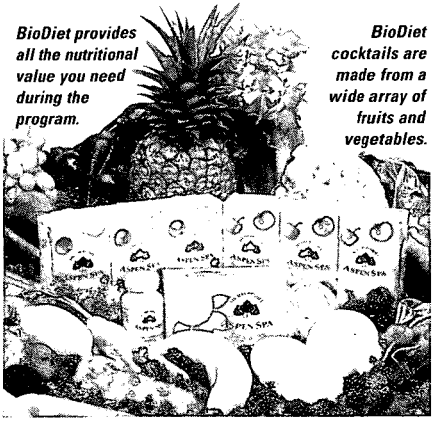

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SKIN CARE UPDATE

The "hidden" problem that forces millions of women to wear pants... and the natural solution!

Formerly available only through dermatologists, this amazing cream eliminates ugly spider veins in just weeks.

by Melinda Walthington

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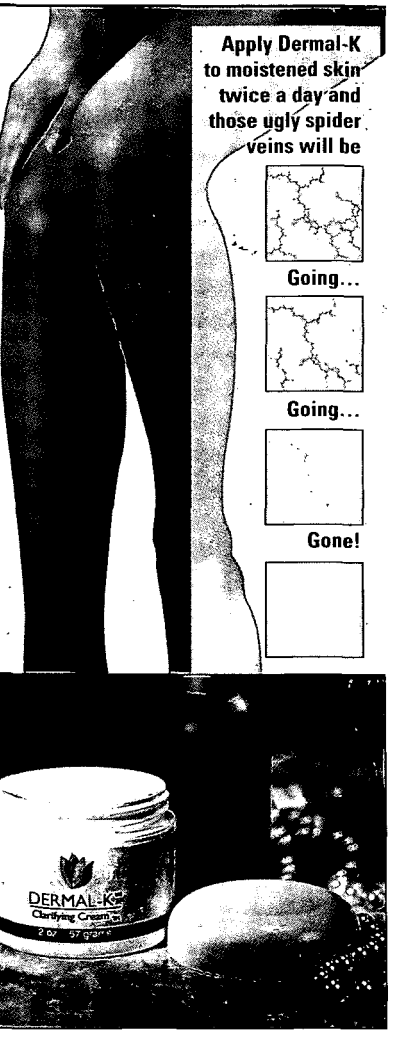

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